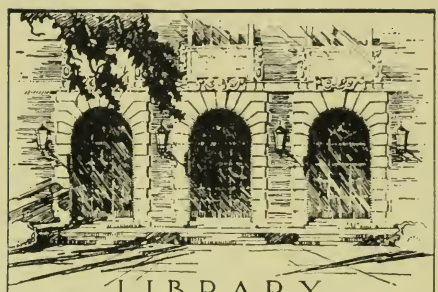
WEST OF SWARDHAM

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"TAY"



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WEST OF SWARDHAM.

VOL. II.

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WEST OF SWARDHAM

A Novel

BY

THE REV. W. O. PEILE,

AUTHOR OF "TAY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

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WEST OF SWARDHAM.

CHAPTER I.

TWO HEARTS AWAKE.

IN the pleasant garden of Swardham Rectory two people are pacing a lilac-shaded walk on this fair evening of early summer. One is a tall, grave man, with strong limbs and fine presence, the other a girl, fresh and fair as the flowers around her, whose bright eyes often seek timidly the man's face, and read there patient resignation such as thrills the gazer's gentle heart.

'It is best as it is, Mary,' he says quietly. 'I am reading all things by new lights

now, and though I thank you for your true loyal friendship, I feel that neither I nor my suit ever deserved such efforts in my cause. Let us not blame Lady Emily. She has acted according to her lights, and it was not her fault, but mine, that in our betrothal there was so little of that deep lasting feeling which ought to have existed between betrothed lovers, and which you naturally gave us both credit for. I meant her no harm, and she means me no harm; but it was all a fair-weather business, like many other things among those of her class, and it is best as it is! I thank God that it is not so with all. You and your father are such friends as make a man rich who has lost all else, and the thought of you will cheer me when I have turned out into the world, to begin the struggle of life.'

Tears sprang to the girl's eye, but she kept them back, and after a while spoke in low soft tones that tried to be very cheerful.

'If you must go—and I feel that we should not hinder you—there is one thing that, if I am indeed accounted your friend, I must venture to say before you leave us. I believe that you will surely and quickly make a name and a place for yourself in the world; little as I know of it, I feel that truth and honour and energy must surely help a man on in it! But I know also that, in any career, just at first money is wanted, and I hope you won't be angry with me if I propose, with papa's knowledge and consent, to lend you mine. Oh Mr. West! what do I want with money? What good is it to me here? There is my poor mother's three thousand pounds in the funds, saving up

against I am twenty-one—you will let me lend it to you, will you not? I wouldn't presume to offer it as a gift, though you would be welcome to it. But as a loan, papa thinks, and I think, we couldn't do better than get you to take it in hand for us—and it might be useful, though it's not much, just at first. Say you will allow us, or I shall think we can't be such friends as you said—please, please don't shake your head, but oblige us by taking it.'

'God bless you, little Mary,' John West replied humbly; 'God bless you, and the good rector too. I can never forget this; I thank you, yes, a thousand times! But I cannot take your money. I am no man of business capacity, dear, to multiply pounds into thousands, but if I were I could not rob you. Why, Mary, this will be your

dower when you make some lucky fellow happy as his wife."

He took her hand as he spoke, and looked sadly and tenderly down at her drooping head, from which the tears dropped fast now. As he finished, for one moment she looked up, while her quivering lips strove to fashion the words 'Never, oh never!' and their eyes met. What was there in the momentary glance of those moist, beseeching eyes which thrilled the strong man to the heart's core, and shook him with some new strange sensation, mingled of exquisite pleasure and almost despair? Could this be little Polly Holbrooke, his mother's petted god-child, his own merry plaything, always sportive and unthinking as a kitten, in the bright old days? No! this was a woman, a woman mute and trembling before the

man whom she worshipped, whose heart she had waked suddenly to the knowledge that he loved and was beloved. Feebly she tried to withdraw her hand, and veil her streaming eyes, but as the little fingers slid through his, his pulses quickened with swift rapture, his sorrows and losses were forgotten; he only knew that he loved this girl whose secret he had surprised, as men can love but once in their lives.

'Mary,' he said in a thick stifled voice, and as the name escaped him, he drew her slight figure towards him, and strained her almost fiercely to his heart, 'Mary, am I mad, or have I won more than all I have lost?'

Her head was on his breast now, and her hand lay still in his, but, as he repeated her name she looked up at him again, with a

wild sweet joy banishing the tears, and murmured low:

'Oh, I am not worthy—not worthy of this from you.'

Then on her astonished face, on her sweet lips and wet cheeks there fell a shower of burning kisses, such as never yet had John West sealed on woman's face. For a few enraptured minutes these two were in Elysium; but for him at least a reaction soon set in, and, while still he held her in his clasp, he asked himself reproachfully why he had thus impulsively taken a bright young girl to share his clouded path, and waste her young love on one who must fight a long up-hill battle before he could claim his bride. But when he looked into her eyes and saw her blushing face radiant, he had not the heart to utter aloud his

misgivings, and soon abandoned himself once more to the untasted sweetness of a first passion. And when Mary had at last fled from him, fled without another word to lock herself in her own chamber for hours of shy sleepless rapture, he determined, before he slept, to seek the rector, and acquaint him with the events of the evening, and his hopes of being requited for all else by winning Mary for his own. In his study he found the good man, busied with writing, and wearing a more cheerful look than of late had been habitual with him.

'No, you will not interrupt me at all,' said the rector; 'sit down, and let us talk, since, for a wonder, a pleasant prospect has opened before me to-day, and I know you will bear with me if I am prosy about it, as

it may deeply concern an old favourite of yours.'

With this prelude Mr. Holbrooke went on to explain that he had that day heard from an old friend, lately returned from Australia where he had spent many years and accumulated considerable wealth. His friend, he went on to say, had an only son, whom he had sent to England for his education, and who, having passed through Eton and Cambridge, was now about to be called to the bar.

'Little did I guess,' continued the rector, 'that the smart young fellow who was reading with Anstey all last summer was my old friend Ted Herbert's boy; as little did I imagine, when I let Mary go so often over to Cumby, that the child was particularly welcome to anybody except Anstey's

girls! But it seems that the young fellow fancies himself desperately in love with my daughter, and has greeted his father, on his arrival the other day in this country, with the news that, unless he consents to his formally proposing for Miss Molly, they had both better ship themselves back to New South Wales without further ado. What Ted Herbert might have said to his heir's passion for a poor parson's girl, under other circumstances, I can't pretend to guess; but it seems that he has not forgotten old days, and no sooner understood that his son's flame was Frank Holbrooke's daughter, than he gave his heartiest sanction to the lad's wishes, and, like the impetuous good-hearted fellow he always was, opened the siege at once with this letter, which has fairly taken me by storm, and, I will own,

given me the first pleasant moment I have known for many a month.'

The rector wheeled round to see his friend's face, his own face wearing something of the old genial, sanguine look which had been chased from it by the events of the past six months; but John West's chair was pushed away from the circle of the shaded lamp's light; and, though he seemed to listen attentively, no word of surprise or congratulation proceeded from him. He only nodded his head, as the rector looked round at him, and uttered a long-drawn 'Ah!'

'This takes you by surprise,' Holbrooke went on briskly; 'of course it does, I am lost in surprise myself; I have never realized that any one could be thinking of my child in that way, and you, I dare say, find it

hard to invest her in the dignity belonging to a young woman for whom flattering proposals have been made. But whether the affair is to end with the proposal or no is more than I can at present guess. The lad is a modest fellow, it seems—none of your fast specimens of the present day—and he avows that, well as he knows his own mind, he is in doubt whether Mary has discovered his real feeling for her, and of course in utter ignorance whether his preference is returned. Ted Herbert thought I might have an idea on the point—but he doesn't know what a careless unsuspicious father I am! Well, I can't sound the dear child on the point—it would be so different if she were not motherless; and the long and short of it is, that on this sheet of paper I am making a clean breast of my ignorance and

incapacity, and at the same time professing my perfect readiness to give the lad a fair field, and perhaps a little favour!'

Again the rector stopped, and West could see that his face was almost the beaming face which had been familiar to him. He felt himself bound to say something, but what could he say? Once more he endeavoured by some inarticulate sound to express his interest in what he heard, and apparently he was successful, for after a moment's pause, his friend began again in more serious tones.

'Such favour, I say, as a father, who would in no way bias his child, may show, I am not disposed to withhold. I scarcely think that Mary has as yet looked on this young Frank Herbert as a lover, but when he declares himself, as he soon will, why

should she not be won? He is a fine, handsome lad, such as any girl might learn to love, and he is the son of a valued old friend, who speaks most highly of him, and is anxious for the match. A year ago I should have felt very differently, had any one sought to take my girl from me; but *now* I can rejoice. I feel that, if such a thing should come to pass, I am the more free to execute a design which has been present to me for a month past, and is taking a strong hold on me. My dear boy, the happiest days of my life have been spent here in Swardham. I thought to die here, and be buried in the old churchyard among my people whom I love. But all that is at an end—the place is not the same place, and never again can be—there is a spirit abroad among the people, too, which

is changing many of them, and there needs another man to cope with these altered circumstances, and fight the Church's battle as, I fear, I never could. I have thought of exchanging, but the patron of this benefice would have to be a party to any such arrangement, and my knowledge of your cousin's opinions and my experience of his disposition towards myself, forbid my approaching him on the subject. Were I alone in the world, I should have already resigned, and sought a curacy in some distant place, but my private means are small, and I could not bear to see Mary deprived of the comforts to which she has been accustomed. These things have cost me many a sleepless night of late, while I felt that my position here would soon become insupportable, and yet saw no way out of

it, consistent with my duty toward my child. But now there is a chance for us both. Ted Herbert is a rich man and generous, and if Frank contrives to find favour in Mary's eyes, I need no longer delay, on her account, to leave Swardham for ever. And I thought, my dear boy, that if your future is laid in London—that great world where fortune awaits the patient and resolute—I might be near my daughter there, and near also to you, if indeed it might not suit you to share my new home for a while, where we might all be a consolation to one another, and keep alive the memory of the dear peaceful days that are fled.'

The rector's voice trembled a little as he finished, with an appealing glance at the tall quiet figure in the shadowed corner.

Then John West rose to his feet, and stepping forward took his old friend's hand; nor was there anything in his voice or gesture to betray the struggle which had raged within him as he listened. Well did he remember the handsome stripling in whose praise men and women had said much during his short stay in a Longshire vicarage. And this youth, so manly and modest, so sociable and gay, had fallen in love with Mary Holbrooke, and could bring to bear riches and hereditary claims for the furtherance of his suit! What was he, John West, that he should bar the claims of such an one? Was the generous impulse born of pure angelic pity, that had swelled a girl's heart for a moment, to be used selfishly against her, for the blighting of her young life, and the disappointment of her

father's hopes? What right had one who had lost all else to keep the treasure which he had surprised from an innocent child, many years his junior. True, he could never cease to feed upon the remembrance of that moment when her head had been on his breast, and her wet eyes had looked so sweetly into his, and her cheeks had suffered his kisses. He had known then, for the first and only time, what it really is to love. But with her, it would not could not be so. How in the first flush of dawning womanhood could she, impressionable as she was, conceive of the passionate depths of a man's nature, schooled and tried as his had been? Rapidly but decisively, as was his wont, he reviewed the situation, and crushed down all pity for himself. It was his duty to remain for

ever silent on the errand which had brought him that night to the rector's study. It was his duty to tear himself at once from the sight of Mary, and spare no pains to efface the impressions of that unguarded moment, so rash and yet so precious, from her young mind. He would apologize by letter for his reckless selfishness, and be gone before she rose on the morrow. What matter how it might wring his own heart to do this? Let her think him unworthy of the treasure of her heart.

But what should the innocent child know of love? It was pity, no doubt, which Mary's guileless heart had mistaken for love; let her forget the mistake, and mate with her equal in years, whom all things combined to recommend as her wooer! He would never see her again, unless as the

happy wife of this most fortunate youth; for he loved her too well to claim her as a sacrifice to himself, and a sharer of his ruined fortunes. She must blot from her memory that short twilight hour, and make her father free and happy by her marriage instead of adding to his embarrassments. Filled with these thoughts, and strong in his resolve, he stood holding the rector's hand, and spoke in gentle sad tones, such as were now habitual with him.

'I thank you, dear old friend, for your confidence, and I can well understand your pleasure in this prospect which has opened. God speed it! say I, and grant your girl and you all that shall be best for you—all the happiness which you both deserve. You will tell her, when the time comes, how I prayed God bless her; for I must

no longer delay my plunge into the great strange world, where I have to shape a new life for myself. I have determined to spare myself the pain of a prolonged farewell, and to-morrow, very early, I purpose to leave you, with a grateful heart, which is all the lighter that I leave you to fair hopes of a brighter future.'

To all Holbrooke's pleading and remonstrances against this sudden resolve West remained impervious. He would write, he said; he had plans, but they were as yet somewhat unsettled. Still they required his immediate departure from the rectory.

'I hate to say good-bye,' he said at last; 'wish me good night—no more. Who shall say how soon we may meet again? Let me depart, after my own whim, before the house is astir. I will leave a little note for

Mary, my mother's little god-daughter, my sister Mary.'

Hand in hand the two men stood for some minutes, their hearts too full for words, and then with a simple 'Good night, then, and God bless you,' they parted.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT THE WORLD SAID.

WHILE the worthy rector of Swardham found in the changes which had come upon his parish, and in his anticipations of still further changes, cause only for the profoundest dissatisfaction and sorrow, there were not wanting others who were also dissatisfied with the more recent course of events, but for reasons vastly opposed to those which swayed Mr. Holbrooke.

When it had first been made known, as an undoubted fact, that the young Squire,

with his pride and his conservatism, had been obliged to turn out, in favour of a cousin, who, though born a West, was yet, by breeding, a son of the people and a handicraftsman, a radical to boot of the most advanced school, great had been the exultation, jubilant the prophecies of the section of the village public of which the Hockerills and Barnetts were the representatives. Heretofore this party had been of small account in the village polity; to use the words of one of their champions, they had groaned beneath the yoke of semi-feudal tyranny; but the tables were turned! a new *régime* was inaugurated, and the down-trodden radicals were eager for their innings, as counsellors and help-mates of a brother whom fortune had called to power and wealth! In this happy expectation

the Hockerill party, swelled each day by fresh adherents, had been loud and energetic in their joy. By them had the arches been reared and the banners emblazoned which gave to Adolphus West's formal entry on his inheritance sufficient of a triumphal character to read very well in the local journals. By them had a con-congratulatory deputation been got up, in which felicitations were skilfully mixed with auguries of the sweeping changes at once to be introduced on the Swardham estate, in the direction of fixity of tenure, reduction of rent, destruction of ground-game, assignment of allotments, and, in short, the institution of an era of liberty, equality, and fraternity! They had sounded their hero's trumpet and their own with no uncertain note, at no timid intervals;

they had spared neither time nor trouble in calling all men to witness what great things would come to pass in Swardham now that Swardham belonged to one of their own order, brought up at the feet of their Longboro' Gamaliel.

But months had passed, and as yet nothing had been done to fulfil their auguries or crown their exertions. The park stretched as amply and as unproductively around the old red Hall as when John West dwelt there; the birds, the hares and rabbits, were no less strictly preserved; the foxes had not been bereft of an earth or a covert; the applications for longer leases, with compensation for improvements, were referred to Scott's in Longborough, with no result in the tenant's favour; the allotment gardens were still dreams of the

future. Worse than all, the new land-owner, the son of the people, on whose advent such high hopes had been formed, was as impracticable, as inaccessible, as the most haughty and bigoted feudalist of his class. Men of weight in Longboro' radical and dissenting circles had been brought to bear upon him by the disappointed men of Swardham, but the weightiest and glibbest of these had been as little able as the local patriots to obtain speech or even sight of the new master of Swardham Hall. Moreover, there were rumours, which did not fail to reach the ears of the malcontents and embitter their already exasperated souls. It was commonly reported in Longshire that Adolphus West, abandoning to his lawyers and agents the management of his estate, had chosen to employ his time and his faculties

in "dancing attendance" upon a certain lady of high birth, but of questionable position and antecedents, at whose instance he was believed to have flung to the winds the principles in which he had been bred, and of which he had been an enthusiastic exponent. Certain it was that his visits at Beausite, a house to which an evil repute had already attached, had become more and more frequent, till they were with slight exaggeration described as daily. Of the "doings" or "carryings on" within that mansion, indeed, little or nothing transpired for the delectation of that portion of the outside world which is particular as to the accuracy of its facts. But this did not hinder a very much larger portion of the said world from regaling itself greedily on a copious supply of stories, which were

at least terribly probable if not quite ac curate.

The least vindictive of these narratives imputed to my lord and his cronies, if not to my lady and the foreign Madams her guests, Sunday gambling at cards and billiards, and daily drinking, betting, and profanity.

It was agreed on all hands that the late Earl must have turned in his grave repeatedly at such profanation of the family seat, whence his widow and her innocent brood had so lately departed.

Thus Longshire in general, crediting the young Lord FitzRaymond and his sister with all manner of naughtiness, was swift to set a big black mark against any one who encouraged these sinners, and how much

more against a personage of such local importance as West of Swardham.

'With his opportunities and his responsibilities,' cried the public of Longshire, 'it is disgraceful and disgusting that he should join himself to such a crew.'

True it is that the unanimity displayed in this condemnation would quickly have vanished if the varying sections composing the said public had compared their views as to what ought to be done by a young man situated as was Adolphus West. 'Choose one of our girls,' Longshire squiredom and its wife would have suggested, 'to teach him how to play the country gentleman.' 'Stand forth for redress of all old abuses, and ventilation of every burning question,' the politicians, whom once he had affected, would have dictated. 'Subscribe to our

restorations, our schools, and charities, and make his peace with the Church, which is ever the fast friend of his order,' the clergy would have added. But whatever the programme recommended *in petto* by each section of the Longshire world, there was but one opinion of the conduct and career of the latest addition to its landed proprietors, and that opinion briefly was that Adolphus West was making a disastrous mess of his position, and was in a fair way to go to the dogs, as no squire of Swardham was recorded to have gone. That gambling and drinking, and swearing and scoffing, all manner, in short, of loose living and loose conversation, were the daily pastimes of the earl and his guests at Beausite, this much was received as gospel by all dwellers in those parts. And as it was known beyond

contradiction that West now lived more of his time at Beausite than in his own house, it was rapidly passing into an article of faith that West was a drunkard and gambler, a profane swearer and scoffer at religion and morality, a loose and profligate liver, to which pleasing catalogue the Hockerills and their party would wrathfully add 'and a renegade, a base deserter to those who love to grind the faces of the poor.' 'He is tied to the apron-string of that woman, who made even foreign towns too hot to hold her,' shuddered the matrons. 'He is hand and glove with that black-leg, who is the disgrace of his order and a scandal even to the turf,' growled their lords. 'He never enters a church, has insulted his rector, and left a letter from the Bishop unanswered,' sighed the parsons. 'He is an oppressor of darker

dye than his predecessors, and a fosterer of all corruption,' raged his former associates. 'He is just what one might expect from his low origin and antecedents,' murmured the gentry. 'He has every vice hereditary in the class to which he belongs,' foamed the demagogues.

And just at this time two announcements were made which further inflamed the virulent, and staggered the charitably disposed. The first was that the rector of Swardham was about to resign his benefice rather than submit to the proximity and insults of a squire so scandalous; the second, that West's own mother had quitted her son's roof, as unfit longer to shelter a virtuous British female. As to the first of these assertions the reader already knows more than the bulk of the Longshire public,

whom the rector had certainly not admitted to his confidence. Mr. Holbrooke indeed always expressed great surprise at the publication of a design, which as yet he had scarcely matured, and declared that he had authorized no one to make any such statement. But he was a man with whom concealment was very difficult, and he was surrounded by excited watchers, anxious to place on his every word such constructions as would bear out their theories, and enrich their stock of contributions to the tattle of the hour. There had been a stormy vestry meeting, the first stormy meeting known in the parochial annals of Swardham, at which it had been proposed to bring forward Jacob Hockerill, a born dissenter, a reputed free-thinker, a radical, as people's churchwarden, in place of old farmer

Hobbs, just deceased. And though West was neither present nor immediately represented at this meeting, it was felt that his protection, or at least non-interference, had encouraged the noisy party, who made things very uncomfortable for the poor rector, and moved him, in the bitterness of his spirit, to give vent to expressions which were eagerly caught up, and quickly manipulated into the assertion that Parson Holbrooke meant to shake the dust of Swardham off his feet, and all along of the new squire and his queer diversions. As to the second announcement, on which especially the censorious loved to dwell, namely, that West's mother refused to live with him any longer, it was unfortunately but too correct. After the first flush of triumph and delight in her dear boy's

magnificent prospects, the widow Van Lennep had found her new-born grandeur irksome, even with the resource of providing the numerous windows of the Hall with hangings netted in a fancy mesh. She was, however, a woman who owned a sense of duty, and would meekly have borne any personal inconveniences for the sake of the son of her affections. The tedious silence and solitude of her days, the more formidable visitations of men-servants and callers, the uncomfortable sense of strangeness and constant company dress and company manners, all these she would have endured uncomplainingly if she had seen her Dolf progressing, as she would have had him progress, along the road to distinction, which now without let was his to tread. And when first she began to be left alone

in the big rooms, morning and evening alike, with increasing frequency, she took comfort in telling herself that her boy was among high people, earls and ladies, who were doubtless fitter company for him than his old mother. It was dull certainly, but she could go to bed when she liked, pleased with the thought that Dolf was valued in titled society. But presently to her ears there filtered tales which sorely shook her complacency. Dolf objected strongly to her little chats with the servants ; but when he was so much away, what could be the harm, after a long day without a soul to speak to, of having in the new housekeeper, just before bedtime, and indulging in a pleasant little gossip over a glass of negus, which Mrs. Milligan compounded so nicely, and was kind enough to bring in quietly

from her own room after the solemn butler and his men had been dismissed for the night? Little relish, however, remained in the negus after certain disclosures which, with many sighs and an oft-shaken head, leaked at last from the housekeeper, and brought dismay to the soul of the widow.

'Wishing, mum, with all my heart that I could say different, as one that has always respected them whose bread I eat, and in no way given to speak evil of dignities, as why should I, that lived over five years with the Dowager Viscountess Chippenham, to the day of her ladyship's lamented death? Still, mum, I will make bold to repeat that the company at my lord FitzRaymond's is no company for a gentleman in master's position, nor for any one as values their repute,

and it is but right that you, mum, should be aware of it, considering all the talk there is about, more's the pity!'

'But oh, Mrs. Milligan,' gasped the affected mother, 'he can't know what they are! he won't go again when he is told! my son was never one to countenance dreadful wicked ways!'

Mrs. Milligan sniffed dubiously before she replied,

'You know best, mum, of course, but they do say as the lord's sister is no better than the rest of the pack, and that master just worships the ground that she treads upon.'

'And he'll be bringing her here as his wife,' cried the old woman with clasped hands.

'Well, mum, there's no knowing the

truth of some matters, and if it's honest courting that master's after, he might at any rate take his lady away out of the card-playing and horse-racing lot, and the painted foreign madams that the place is full of. But there! folks will have it that this lady Georgiana isn't free to marry, having a husband wandered away somewhere in outlandish parts, though she hasn't set eyes on him, by all accounts, for years. And if that is so, it's a bad business for master to be crazy about her, and all the people round talking about nothing else for weeks and months past! But it's past your bedtime, mum, and I'm sure I hope you'll excuse the liberty I take in detaining you from your rest.'

No rest, however, was possible to Mrs. Van Lennep. Milligan had murdered sleep,

and her mistress, after a miserable night, was quite justified in stopping her son, as he prepared to mount his horse for the familiar journey to Beausite, by tidings that she was confined to her room by serious illness, and begged to see him before he left home. Impatiently he presented himself in his mother's chamber, and there underwent a most unpleasant interview, the first of a series of unpleasant interviews, which culminated in a breach between mother and son, and a resolve on Mrs. Van Lennep's part to quit the house into which she had entered with such pride and triumph but a few months before. Tearful and imploring as the old woman at first appeared, she was not to be soothed by vague assurances; and, her worst fears being confirmed by her son's evasive and hasty answers to

her questions, she displayed an amount of persistency which at first disconcerted and then angered him. Especially was his wrath kindled by his mother's obstinate determination to invoke the aid and counsel of a certain nonconformist divine in Longborough, whose chapel she had attended in her days of peaceful obscurity.

'I'll have no oily ministers prying and meddling in my affairs, and so I give you fair warning, mother.'

'He that will not hear the Church, Adolphus, let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican. Oh, my son, my son, you will not listen to your mother, but you will not refuse to hearken to the Church.'

'Church indeed,' quoth Adolphus, with fine scorn, 'why can't the fellow stick to

his periwinkles, and let the Church take care of itself?'

Alas! it was too plain to Matilda Van Lennep that her boy's corruption had made terrible progress, that amid the pitch of his new associates he was already defiled. True it was that the pastor of Rehoboth chapel had in earlier days sought his living as an itinerant vendor of shell-fish, but Dolf knew well that for years he had been esteemed a devoted and gifted preacher; and though at no time numbered among the regular attendants at that lowly conventicle, yet never before had he thus openly scoffed at his mother's spiritual guide.

'For shame, Adolphus! I grieve to live to cry shame upon you; but I will not be overruled, and let you rush to your ruin.

To-morrow I send for that worthy man. Heaven grant he may be able to come; if you will not hear him, he shall wrestle in prayer for you.'

White with rage at this unexpected resistance to his sovereign pleasure, Adolphus so far forgot himself as to hiss out an oath, and once more peremptorily forbidding that Mr. Huleatt should enter his doors, flung out of the room, and hurried off to the society of his enchantress. On the morrow, nevertheless, Mr. Huleatt came, fetched over from Longborough in the brougham specially allotted to Mrs. Van Lennep, and the result was a scene; after which the mother and son did not speak while the former remained at Swardham Hall. And within a week, the observant public was gratified by Mrs. Van Lennep's

taking up her abode in a furnished villa of the highest respectability situated in the best suburb of Longborough. Mr. Clark indeed went about pooh-poohing the notion of a quarrel, and asserting that the old lady's change of residence was simply due to her desire of 'sitting under' her favourite pastor, and that her relations with her son were, as ever, of the most affectionate. But the public refused to be hoodwinked, and it was quickly noised abroad that the mistress of Adolphus West's house had fled from orgies which surpassed, if possible, the 'doings' at Beausite, and so disgraced the venerable Hall of Swardham that it was no longer a home for any religious and self-respecting female.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUSITE.

IT may be at once frankly stated that in the manifold rumours circulated in Longshire as to 'doings' and 'orgies' in two of its most considerable mansions, there was not only much exaggeration, but a vast amount of sheer invention, which did much credit to the imaginations of the gossips. Of the introduction of revellers from Beausite or elsewhere into his own house, Adolphus West was of course, in fact if not also in intent, wholly guiltless; and of the 'doings' in that desecrated

mansion, trivial as they were compared with the rumoured enormities, he was rather an indifferent witness, for the most part, than a participator. Indeed, disappointing as the admission would have been to half the neighbourhood, a truthful observer must have admitted that neither in drinking, nor in gambling, nor in fast conversation had 'the misguided young man' learned to take any delight, though he had become the daily frequenter of a society which indulged in all these iniquitous amusements.

But, alas! by his associates, from ancient days, has a man been known and judged, and it must be owned that Lord Fitz-Raymond and his sister had gathered around them a curious little knot of kindred spirits, meet subjects for the tattling

tongues of Longshire. Mrs. Milligan, speaking with the tongue of rumour, had alluded to 'painted foreign madams,' as well as to horse-racing, gambling men, and true it was that Lady Georgiana was entertaining beneath her brother's roof two dear friends and continental acquaintances, who now kindly consented to enliven her seclusion in Longshire, and answered to the names of Madame Meslin and the Baronne d'Oisan.

Of these the titled lady was a large fair Belgian or Netherlander, and the other a skinny and vivacious little Parisian. Both were very much dressed and carefully cosmetiqued, neither was accompanied by her husband, or embarrassed by any scruples which might not have consorted with the free and easy ways of the house. To

balance these fair guests there was no lack of gentlemen, except about the time of Doncaster or other distant race-meetings.

Slangy captains came and went, came again and went again, and one bosom friend of the earl, Jimmy Clancy by name, was now almost as much at home at Beausite as its noble owner. By the help of these guests, male and female, many a bottle was indeed emptied and many a box of Havanas, and many a game of loo kept up till daybreak. But it was soon known among them that the ever-present West could not be enticed to lose more than a sovereign or so at a time over the cards, nor so overcome by liquor as to wax more pliable. He was not indeed absolutely strait-laced or stingy, for it was no secret that he had at any rate

found the cases of champagne which were now broached so liberally, but he seemed to prefer a quiet hand of piquet with his hostess, or a chat in a corner, to the noisier games and the badinage of the general circle, and certainly had no eyes for the charms of the *décolletée* Baroness or the sparkling Madame Meslin.

To these ladies indeed it was an enigma why their dear Lady G. and her brother were so untiringly civil to a person so uncongenial as this pallid bourgeois man. A few dozens of sparkling wine had been an acceptable contribution to the rather scanty cellar, but the cost must have been a mere bagatelle to a wealthy English proprietor; and it could surely be no fun for a woman who had gone the pace in Wiesbaden, Hombourg and Paris, to smile

on the clumsy homage of this rustic! But Lolotte and Marie, confidential friends as they were, had not been by on a certain afternoon when their beloved 'Georgette' had found her new admirer ready to do far more for her sake than submit to be fleeced at cards, or mulcted of a pound or two over some sweepstake. Never, indeed, had either lady beheld 'Georgette' as she appeared on this occasion, when Adolphus, entering as usual into the familiar room, had discovered his radiant enchantress crouched disconsolately on a sofa, red-eyed and dishevelled, and scarce able to speak for gathering tears.

'Oh, it is nothing,' she said, 'nothing that I must trouble you with, nothing but what might be expected at any moment! Only to-morrow there will be an execution

in the house. The descent of one flight of harpies will be a signal to all the rest of poor Fairy's foes, and I shall be cast on the hard world again, without a home, just as I had learned to be happy here, just as I had come to value—but, it can be nothing to you! I am glad you are here, for after to-day we have no house to see our friends in,—we may never meet again,' and she turned her face round upon the cushions, and seemed to weep noiselessly.

West was by no means free with his money, nor prone to lavish an incautious generosity; but at this moment, looking upon the distress of the woman who had enslaved him, he felt that, if it should cost him half his fortune, he must come to the rescue, and avert the horrid chance of

being bereft of Lady G.'s society. With many protestations, and a voice that trembled with yet unspoken passion, he bade defiance to all sacrilegious intruders, and besought the grieving lady to cheer up, relying on his purse and good offices.

'Ah, my friend!' she cried, as she took his hand, 'you are too good! too noble! I hesitate to involve you in the troubles of a most unfortunate and ill-used family; for my own sake, I could not accept your generous offers, but my heart bleeds for my brother. Brought up as he was, reared in the expectation of wealth corresponding to his place in the world, he has been betrayed and beggared, — betrayed by a designing woman who imposed on our father's dotage; beggared to keep her and

her brood in luxury to which they have no right. Poor Fairy! you will find him in the library, alone with his sorrow, and there you will hear the particulars of this menaced outrage, if indeed you are resolved to help, and perhaps see your way to sparing him an indignity.'

Adolphus would infinitely have preferred doing business exclusively with Lady G., but there was no help for it. Her soul evidently revolted from sordid details; and so to the library he presently repaired. In this apartment, lined with the dusty legal tomes accumulated by the founder of the family, he found the earl smoking a big cigar, and looking surprisingly equable and unconcerned for a man on the brink of ruin.

Before he quitted the room West had

signed a cheque for eighteen hundred pounds odd, which would, as he was assured, suffice to keep the bailiffs out of Beausite, and for which he accepted Lord FitzRaymond's note-of-hand.

Adolphus had made up his mind, as he pulled out his cheque-book, to extract at this crisis from his friend some definite information on a delicate point. He had heard, with affected incredulity, but with inward uneasiness, his mother's assertion that Lady Georgiana had a husband living in some remote region, and he thought that now was the moment for being enlightened as to the truth of a report which traversed his most treasured aspirations.

Often and often, in their many quiet confabulations, had the question trembled upon his tongue's tip, but it had remained unasked,

and the declaration of his passion, which would have followed on a favourable reply, was as yet unspoken. Now, however, when conferring so remarkable a favour, he thought that the moment had arrived for ending all uncertainty by putting to the earl the question which he had not put to the earl's sister. Awkwardly and bashfully, as he tore out his cheque, the question was put, and an answer awaited with a beating heart.

'Is my sister free?' repeated Lord Fitz-Raymond, with raised brows, as he folded the precious bit of paper. 'Well, upon my soul, that's more than I can answer for her. I hardly think she knows herself. She *was* married, you know, though she didn't change her name — married when quite a child, to our cousin Aylmer—*would*

have him, you know!—a very good fellow in his way Aylmer was, but the last man to have saddled himself with a wife. Where he is now nobody knows. I believe he is dead, myself, dead of cholera somewhere in Turkey; but, even if he is alive, there is no doubt that he has forfeited all right to poor Georgie, who could have a divorce if she chose to apply for it. Whether she would, of course, I can't say. It would be a bore, and it would cost a lot of money.'

The anxious listener murmured, as the earl paused, a word to the effect that money difficulties could be got over. But without noticing that word the other went on in blither tones,—

'It isn't exactly a subject I like, but you are a friend in need, and if what I say puts you on a right tack, why I don't grudge

it. Ah, Lolotte!' (as the plump baroness peeped into the room); 'don't run away, we are quite done with business, and longing for your cheerful society. What do you say to toddling round to the stables? There is to be a grand rat hunt this afternoon, and Jimmy has been ass enough to back his cur against my Derrick. Won't you come with us, West? Well, ta-ta, then.'

And away sped the peer, like a schoolboy released, to his congenial pastime. It was not then an idle slander which had caused West's disquietude! The earl's carelessly worded information had caused a wild ferment in his brain, but he felt that his passion for Lady Georgiana was burning no less fiercely for the disclosure. The more difficult his suit, the more ardent became his desire of pushing it to a

successful event. He had hoped to win her by the force of his passion and the weight of his wealth—now he would still offer to dower her with all his love and all his money, if she would first permit him to rescue her from a position which could not fail to be painful. And without money, and probably perseverance and patience also, such rescue were impossible.

At any cost, by any expenditure of pains and gold, the fate of this worthless husband must be ascertained. Should proof of his death be forthcoming, all difficulty would surely vanish. Should he be traced to some Oriental haunt, and found in life, and in the exercise of such infidelities as the earl had hinted, then he would be amenable to the strong arm of the law, which would unfetter the matrimonial chain so lightly

worn. Of desertion, at least, the man, if alive, was clearly guilty, and West nothing doubted that graver charges could be substantiated. He had been furious with his mother when she spoke of this husband's possible existence; he had been wretched in his fears that her words might be verified. But now, knowing the worst, he found himself nothing daunted or discouraged. To win this woman for his wife had become his sole aim and ambition. She had dazzled, intoxicated, enthralled him; but, great as were the advantages he could offer to the penniless beauty, he had trembled at the possibilities of a rejection, a repulse which would blight his life. Now he thought he saw the true cause which had forbidden her to give him definite hope; but let the death or delinquency

of the wretch who had marred her youth be proved conclusively, proved by *his* triumphant exertions, then surely would his devotion have its reward, and his claims be found irresistible!

Adolphus bit his nails fiercely as these thoughts coursed through his brain. She should be his, if he had to serve for her as long as Jacob served for Rachel!—his, sooner or later: if already a widow, then sooner; if encumbered by a tie which the law would dissolve, then later! But in any case, his she must be. Of the voice of offended society, of the horror and dismay of a puritan mother, of the difficulties and drawbacks attendant on marriage with a divorced woman, he recked nothing at all. His chances were better, perhaps, than if she had been, as he thought her at first, a single

woman. Not every man, even in pursuit of one so peerless, would undertake such a quest as he had already determined to prosecute. He must take the earl into his counsels;—how fortunate that he had the means of conciliating the earl!—and then, if just a look, just a word, should be vouchsafed him as earnest of the reward he craved, he would start off to the uttermost parts of the earth, if need be, resigning all present ease and leisure, all plan and purpose of his life, and never see Swardham again till he could have the prospect of sharing its state with the woman who had inspired him with a consuming and desperate passion.

CHAPTER IV.

FLIGHT.

WE must now, in order to follow the fortunes of the dispossessed squire, turn back to the morning on which, according to his resolve declared to the rector only, John West had quitted the Holbrookes' hospitable roof. In his cruel pain and irresistible yearnings after what might have been but never could be, he had lain sleepless through the short summer night, and saw the first flush of dawning day with dry hot eyes that ached wearily. Gently he

rose from his bed, and leaned from the open window to look round, for the last time, on the landscape once so dear to him. There, in the soft grey light, he could discern each familiar object—the spire of the old church beneath whose chancel rested his mother and his grandfather, with so many of his ancient line; the tufted trees of the park which had owned him as its lord; the lowly roofs of cottages whose inmates still slept. With the dull pain of a wound that is growing old he viewed all. House and land had slid from him, his kindred had gone down into the grave;—to these grim facts he had waked morning after morning, and he could take his punishment as an English gentleman, suffering but making no sign.

On this morning, however, there was a new barb quivering in his breast; he felt

a lonelier and more broken man, while he clung unflinchingly to his resolve to hide away his new-born love for Mary, to strangle his one sweet solace in its very birth. It was right, he thought bitterly, it was nothing but just, that one who had in days of boundless prosperity done despite to the sweetness of true love, should in his parching hour of adversity be allowed no more than to put his lips to love's refreshing cup, before it were snatched from him. The false love, the wretched semblance with which he had been content, had turned to dust and ashes before the approach of misfortune, and he had learned the taste of true love, only to mourn its loss for ever in his inmost heart.

Oh heaven! how blind, how mad had he been in the old days, when he had

believed himself superior to every sentimental weakness, proof against all tender infirmity! when, neglecting the pearl that nestled close to his hand, he had preferred to cast his eyes on tawdry tinsel! Well, it was all one now—he would drag down no one in his ruin; he would, if it might be, blot himself from all remembrance.

It was broad daylight now, and John West was soon dressed, and had packed a valise which held all that he had chosen to bring away from the Hall, the few clothes and personal belongings which were too valueless to be surrendered to his cousin. Then he sat down at a table, and biting his lips, wrote with firm unfaltering hand his farewell to Mary.

'God bless her!' he murmured as he

folded the note. 'God grant that she may take it as I would have her, and forget last evening as a dream.'

In a few minutes he was making swiftly, by dewy field-paths, for a small station on the nearest line of rails, distant some six miles from Swardham. As he had hoped, no one was astir till he had walked beyond the bounds of the estate which had passed from him. No pitying or curious eye noted his flight. It was nearly six o'clock when he reached the humble wooden sheds known as Winbush Road station, and there was, as he had ascertained, an up-train due at a quarter past the hour. 'London—third class—no, *not* return.' He winced as he uttered the latter words—they sounded like a knell.

But the new life was begun, ushered

in by the cheap green ticket, which entitled him presently to the fifth seat on a hard and narrow bench. The carriage was low-roofed and dingy, the windows were jealously shut by fat old women. Poor Jack sighed faintly as he edged in between a female with a baby and a shiny master-butcher, and wondered how soon it would come natural to him to live without any air to speak of. He had intended to think over his plans when once he should be fairly started on his journey, but the atmosphere was unfavourable to thought. He found himself counting the buttons on the baby's staring plaid cloak, and wondering whether it would go on long nudging him in the waistcoat with its worsted-clad feet, and then he became drowsy. The rattle of the window-frames and whirring

of the wheels merged themselves in a soothing drone, and Jack slept, and dreamed.

He was hunting—he was mounted on Cavalier, his favourite black horse—there were the hounds in full cry, and not a soul but he in sight. He chuckled gleefully—and just then the fox got to earth—why was that earth not stopped?—and Jack was resolved to dig him out. In a trice he was through an amazing depth of sandy soil, and his outstretched hand was rashly clutched upon a splendid brush—when a most vicious dig in the ribs awoke him, and a tart voice hissed out,—

'If you don't sit up, sir, and let go of my boa this instant, I'll complain to the guard of you at the next station.'

In deep confusion Jack apologized to the

lady who sat opposite to him, in whose lap it seemed he had been grovelling for the moment last past, and once more applied himself to think what he should turn his hand to on his arrival in London. He was hale and strong, but probably he could not compete, if he sought a job where mere strength would be a qualification, against an ordinary day labourer. But if head-work were the requisite qualification, he would certainly be less a match for a trained clerk at accounts than for a navvy at heaving or pick-axing. There was the army—of course he might enlist! but Jack shuddered. He knew something of the private soldier and his manner of living, and he thought that, on the whole, he would rather break stones than take her Majesty's shilling. Besides, even if he could join some excep-

tional corps, he would never be safe from coming into contact with some one among the officers or their friends who would know him or know Longshire, and all the story about the Swardham estate. That would never do. Come what might—let his descent in the scale be what it might—he would never discount his misfortunes, never endure words or deeds of so-called sympathy from any living man save the old friend from whose house he was flying.

There had not been wanting, while still West tarried at the rectory, proffers of sympathy, and overtures of helpfulness from old friends of the house of Swardham. Several had written, and begged the hapless squire to let them know if they could be of any service. Some had left their cards at the rectory, and Sir Tancred

Woollett had been very persistent in his attempts to see his neighbour in his trouble' and devise some scheme to lighten it. But to each and all, even to good-natured old Sir Tancred, John West had proved invisible and impracticable.

'I think you ought to see old friends of the family,' so the rector had urged, but he urged in vain.

West was stubborn in his proud isolation, and vouchsafed to no man better answer than could be extracted from a coldly formal note, 'returning thanks for kind inquiries.'

Having in this manner repulsed all succour of his acquaintance, and now cut himself off from those whom alone he allowed as friends, he was launching himself on a strange world, as solitary as he was

inexperienced in gainful arts, as poor as proud. Beside a sovereign or two, he had but a cheque on a London banker for fifteen pounds eight shillings, being the balance, as per account of Scott's in Longborough, due to him after settling all claims upon his mother's fortune. This slender stock of cash, with a bare sufficiency of good clothing, comprised the whole possessions of this man, but late lord of broad acres and a fine income, member of Parliament and master of hounds in prospective, and accepted suitor of a duke's daughter.

Jack began to think about Job, the much-enduring patriarch, instead of applying himself steadily to the problem of how to earn an honest living. Ah! of course there was no comparison—never would be! He chid himself for irreverence, but could not dismiss

the train of thought. Surely poverty in that pre-historic era was less hateful, less vulgar, than in our artificial society. But the sore disease! the merciless friends! —these things, coming on the top of other grave misfortunes (on which Jack was less able to fix his thought), rendered Job's case quite unapproachably bad. At the same time, Jack doubted if in Job's days there were any accompaniment of coming down in the world as palpably disagreeable as riding in a well-filled third-class carriage.

How sleepy the closeness made him after his sleepless night! But the lady opposite had her eye upon him, and glared implacably if he did but nod.

How odd that he should feel drowsily amused at this irascible female. Perhaps

Job, as he sat in silence on his ash-heap for seven days and nights, did not think *all* that time of his trouble, of his sons and daughters crushed to death amid their revelling, or of his fold desolated by the thunder-bolt, or of his stalls emptied by nimble-fingered robber-bands. Who shall say that his mind never ran on such trifles as the shadows moving and lengthening as sun or moon rose and declined in heaven, or the quick darting of the lizards among the stones, or the pertinacious flies that buzzed around? Who shall say that it is not a special mercy which slackens anon the tension of an over-wrought mind, causing some harmless trifle to absorb for a short interval the faculties which might be strained into uselessness if continuously concentrated on a harrowing and weighty topic?

'May I offer you the *Field?*' says a pleasant voice breaking on Jack's reverie.

A poor curate has got in at the last stoppage, and he it is who extends the paper in question, which Jack accepts with thanks. It is of no use trying to think in this carriage, and he may as well read. His eye runs down columns of advertisements concerning houses, moors, yachts, horses, carriages. Plenty of keepers and gardeners, too, wanting places—and not half as many places advertised where such functionaries are wanted. Ah! what is this long advertisement—of a most anomalous character, truly. Why mightn't it? Jack reads it again—

'Wanted, on an isolated estate in the western highlands of Scotland, a sober man, of some education and intelligence, who is

also a first-rate shot, as out-door assistant of the owner — a naturalist and taxidermist. Liberal terms to a suitable man. Apply personally or by letter to Z., care of Fife, Mackenzie, and Malcolm, 9, Andiron Lane, in the city of London.'

'It's not like a keeper's place, where there would be shooting parties, and heaven knows who might turn up and recognize one in the velveteens,' he ruminated. 'This is some eccentric old fellow evidently, probably almost a hermit. "Isolated estate!" that would suit me down to the ground. "First-rate shot!" I dare say I might pass muster among the best that Mr. Taxidermist is acquainted with. I suppose he wants a fellow to shoot all manner of strange fowl for him to stuff; well, I'm his man, if I'm educated and intelligent enough. At any

rate I'll make a note of the address, and find my way to Andiron Lane to-morrow morning. Likely judges of shooting the denizens of Andiron Lane, I should say!'

And then Jack forced himself, in terror lest he might fall into trains of thought which he had forbidden himself, to talk with the kindly clergyman who had lent him the paper. They chatted away till the London terminus was reached at last, and the parson took his leave with the impression that he had enjoyed the society of a most pleasant gentleman, inclined, if anything, to be almost recklessly mercurial—a man, probably, who had never known a care.

CHAPTER V.

PHRENOLOGY TO THE RESCUE.

'OH, it's nothing to me, sir, nothing at all to me. A man with my credentials hasn't no need to cast about long for a good position. But I feel, sir, that it 'ud be a disappointment to the gentleman if he knowed he had missed me, when willing to go, being recommended Scotch air by my physician, as am confident that I am the man for the place; and if not engaged immediate, there ain't a chance of my not

being snapped up elsewheres within a week.'

The speaker is a hulking creature with a purple nose, and great splay feet in nailed boots, and, as far as a bad squint will permit him, he is fixing with his watery eye a little elderly gentleman, spare and precise, whose hand strokes his lean shaven jaws, while his eyes are bent downwards during this harangue. When the eloquence of the tall man, who looked like a seedy keeper out of place (which indeed he was), had subsided, the spare gentleman heaved a sigh and rang a bell.

'You wouldn't grudge a cove his expenses from Canning-town then?' puts in red-nose with a whine.

'Mr. Bland, show this person out, and

when he is outside the front door, give this person a shilling.'

'Beg pardon, Mr. Fife,' says the clerk who answered the bell, 'but there's another waiting. Will you see him, or—'

Heaving another sigh, the head of the firm of stockbrokers in Andiron Lane replies,

'I suppose I must, and God send it may be the right one.'

Gulping down feelings which if expressed might have imperilled the promised shilling, the unsuccessful candidate lumbered from the room, and met in the passage the competitor just announced.

'I'd say, 'ere's luck, mate, in a general way; but you won't make nothing of the party in there—not if you respects yourself and your profession, you won't;' and with

a mistrustful eye he scanned a very athletic figure. 'What, you're one of the 'orty 'uns, are you?' he continued. 'Bad luck for such as me when gents such as you comes after situations.'

'If you want that bob you'd better look sharp,' says the clerk; and red-nose moves off, having delivered himself of an exquisite sarcasm, as he flattered himself, and made poor Jack excessively uncomfortable.

He had arrayed himself in a coloured shirt and a shooting-suit which had seen service, and yet that brute had taxed him with being a gentleman, and flung it in his teeth that he was seeking to take the bread out of poor men's mouths! He scarcely looked at Mr. Fife while he answered a few questions. First, what was his name?' He had thought of this as a probable preliminary

the evening before, while he sat in his cheap bed-room at a coffee-house in the City Road. West was a common name enough, and would suggest nothing to a stranger; but what right had he now to the name of West? In his early boyhood he had been taught so to call himself, his widowed mother also resuming that her maiden name, because his grandfather wished the heir of Swardham to bear the same style as for centuries had been associated with the oldest place in Longshire. But Swardham was no longer his, in possession or expectation, and so neither should the name be his any longer. His father's name was somewhat uncommon, and decidedly too aristocratic for a working man. He smiled bitterly as he thought of Lady Emily's probable horror of a cousin labouring for

weekly wage. No, he would bring no scandal on the Hexham collaterals. He would just drop the last syllable of his father's name, and as plain John Wood defy all curiosity such as might have attached to a Woodvil. As John Wood, then, he introduced himself to Mr. Fife.

Next, what had he been, and with whom? From boyhood he had attended an old gentleman in the country, who was now dead, both in riding and shooting. He had been in no other service, could give no reference, and, finally, declined to mention the name of the deceased old gentleman or the neighbourhood in which he had lived.

'Oh, dear! oh, dear!' cried Mr. Fife peevishly, 'and I began to think you might do; but who ever heard of such nonsense?

and what's the good of coming after a place if you are dumb as to your past?'

'I know it must seem odd, sir, and go against me probably; but, on the word of —of an honest man, I assure you I have nothing to conceal which should prevent your engaging me, or my filling such a place as you advertise competently.'

'I advertise! If it was for myself, now—but, thank heavens, I never set foot across the Border, and care nothing for sheldrakes and garganeys. It's a brother of mine, who chooses to spend his days in an inaccessible island, and wants a man to shoot him rare birds, that he may send a version of these poor victims down to posterity, improved out of all natural semblance by his stuffing. I began to think you were the man; but how can I send my brother a fellow who

refuses all account of his antecedents? It's preposterous!' and Mr. Fife looked genuinely disappointed, while he scanned Jack closely.

'The only decent one among the lot,' he muttered; 'and a brute such as that last had magnificent testimonials. Forged, I dare say; and this chap is at least guiltless of that fraud.'

Summoning the same clerk again by means of a tube, into which he whistled and then spoke, he said sharply,

'If Mr. David has not gone out, ask him to be good enough to step this way. David,' he went on, as some one presently entered, 'if your studies in phrenology and so on are worth a rush, now is your time to prove it. Here's a man applies for that birth in Sconsay, but declines to give any reference except his own word as to

past conduct and experience. Should I be justified, according to your Lavater and the other oracles, in believing him, and taking him on trust? or is it my duty, as indicated by the bumps, to send him about his business.?'

All this was in a rapid sort of half aside, but Jack heard every word, and darted a half-amused glance at the new-comer. Heaven and earth! where had he seen that sallow face, those lantern jaws, before? Would he presently find himself recognized with more certainty than he could bring to bear on this spare stranger? It was a trying moment, and his eyes sank as the other faced him. At Swardham! yes, certainly in the far-off days at Swardham he had encountered this man—but how or with whom he had come to Sward-

ham West could not recall. He bit his lips a little and flushed up as a bony yellow hand pushed in among his thick black hair, and passed over his poll—but it was a relief to be treated thus unceremoniously. Surely the man had failed to recognize him, or he could not make so free.

'The owner of this cranium,' spoke the oracle harshly at last, 'should be capable of nothing treacherous or mean. He is probably too good to waste himself on Robert's vagaries, but that's his affair. As to your risk, this testimony of phrenology is worth all the written characters in the world—so don't let the lack of them deter you from engaging the man, if you think him otherwise suitable.'

Mr. Fife fetched a deep breath, as one relieved, and said,

'Well, at any rate, my responsibility in the matter will be shared by you! I'm only too thankful to be spared further trouble, unusual as it is to engage a man on his own recommendation, and the strength of his bumps; but mind, if he makes Sconsay too hot to hold him, it's on your black arts the blame will rest.' Then turning to Jack, he said, 'As Mr. Auchmuty's verdict on you is favourable, I will overlook your strange reserve as to yourself, and trusting that your account is correct, engage you on my brother's behalf for six months, certain, if that will do.'

'Auchmuty!' Jack chased the name through the corridors of his memory, and at last it flashed upon him that it was to Lady Woollett's brother, the poor rector's pet aversion, that he owed this good turn.

How lucky that in John Wood Mr. Auchmuty recognized no trace of John West, the squire of Swardham! No recognition at least peeped from those slits of eyes, or lent an inflection to that deliberate and creaking speech. In fear of detection, he said as little as possible while Mr. Fife went into details as to the place, the wages, the journey, and so on, and escaped at last in the full confidence that he had come scathless through this his first ordeal. Happily it was likely enough to be his last, for the naturalist being eager for his assistant's presence, he was to leave London for Glasgow by the night express; and once safe in Sconsay, it was almost impossible that he could be again startled by a face that had belonged to any scene of that played-out drama, his past.

CHAPTER VI.

SCONSAY.

SCONSAY is one of the inner Hebrides, and nestles between the long bulwark of Skye and the Ross-shire coast, from either of which it is equidistant. It is a small island compared with such as Rum or Mull, and, offering no sport to the deer-stalker or salmon-fisher, nor any special attractions in the way of crag, cliff, or water-fall to the lover of the picturesque, is unknown to fame, and ignored of the guide-books. Shaped something like to a figure

8, its northern half is mainly a mass of barren and broken sandstone, intersected by narrow gorges and boggy valleys, clothed with the scarlet-seeded rush and the fragrant gale, and dotted here and there with tarns or lochs, the favourite haunts of many gulls and other sea fowl. The southern portion, on the other hand, is flat and fertile, presenting marvellous expanses of the richest white clover, which, on a warm day of summer, breathes its sweet scent far over the waste of tumbling waters surrounding the isle.

Just to the north of the narrow isthmus which connects these two portions, the rocky ridges curve apart and leave in the centre a sort of sunken amphitheatre, open only toward the south; and here, on the only level spot of any size in the northern division, the Highland family who formerly

owned Sconsay had built a solid ugly house of rough-hewn sandstone, thickly faced with white 'harling' or rough-cast, and further fenced from the searching blasts by regiments of sombre firs and alders. There was no view from any window of the house, and when Robert Fife first bought the property he was loud in his complaints against the stupidity of the Macraes, who had chosen the site, instead of perching upon higher ground whence they could have commanded splendid prospects of the indented coast of the mainland, and of the peaks of Skye and the more distant islands. But after his first winter in Sconsay Robert Fife complained no more, allowing tacitly that the Macraes knew what they were about when they chose the island valley for their dwelling and daubed their walls with that thick coat

of 'harling' or white rough-cast, and planted those sheltering firs. In fair weather it was easy to scale the heights and enjoy the view and fresher air, but in the long winter and wet spring, the new proprietor found cause to rejoice that he had come after a prudent race, who had viewed their rough heritage not with the eye of summer sojourners, but as those who must dwell all the year round beneath those fickle skies, and within sound of those tremendous seas.

The eldest son of a successful London merchant of Scottish descent, Robert Fife inherited a good fortune, and at an early age abandoned business to his younger brothers, and after years of travel devoted himself to his peculiar tastes in the seclusion of Sconsay. Here for years he had dwelt, accumulating a vast collection of birds and

their eggs, which it was his delight to range in endless cases around the walls of his house, and meditating, rather than actually labouring at, a work on ornithology, which was to be the authority of future ages on all the wild fowl of the Hebrides.

Such was the man and such the domain to which John West was introduced 'on the strength of his bumps,' at the end of his long journey from London, first by rail to Glasgow, then by steamer from the Clyde to Kyle Akin, and thence by a clumsy sailing boat or 'scow' to Sconsay. It did not take long to introduce the new-comer to the inhabitants of the isle. Besides his employer, and his employer's niece,—who for two years had lived with her uncle, and contributed to the book of the future by making drawings of the rarer specimens

which he obtained,—there were only a few servants and outdoor retainers, who were all natives of those latitudes, and but imperfectly acquainted with the Southron tongue.

Robert Fife was a shy, nervous little old man, dry and spare as a chip, and, as it seemed, with hardly an idea beyond his favourite hobby. At first he was dreadfully afraid of Jack, whom he treated with much deference; but soon finding that he had gained a valuable assistant, who was never stupid, and never missed anything that ought to be shot, or spoiled a fine specimen by clumsy shooting, he rubbed his hands with infinite satisfaction, and cherished but one remaining fear, that 'Wood' might presently tire of his present existence, and leave the naturalist lament-

ing. As to the niece, the orphan child of a dead brother, Jack found her by no means so easy to understand as her uncle.

Hilda Fife was a young woman of twenty-seven, tall, thin, and active as a roe. But no exercise, no amount of exposure to sun, wind, or weather availed to lend a colour to her pale face, seeming all the paler for her black hair, which hung, straight and lustreless, all round her head, and rested on her shoulders. Her thin features were correctly good, but her face was too long for its width, and her grey eyes were too closely set together for beauty. Some people called Miss Fife a fine young woman, but no one had ever thought her pretty, or even attractive. With this young lady John Wood had expected to have little or nothing to do, but he soon found that he

was daily thrown unavoidably in her way, both because, in so small a community, each member was frequently obliged to meet with all the rest, and because it was Jack's duty, whenever he had bagged some special prey, to consult Miss Hilda as to the expediency of its being immortalized by her pencil, and furnish for her guidance details of its habits and haunts in life. Of all the simple duties which it fell to his lot to perform, Jack least relished these interviews with Miss Fife.

'I don't know how it is,' he said to himself, 'but there is something I don't like about that girl—something, I might add, if it mattered to me a straw, that I couldn't exactly trust.'

In her manner indeed, which was coldly decorous, if less haughty than her bearing

toward other persons in her uncle's employ, there was nothing to which he could justly take exception. But he fancied that the cold grey eyes watched him with an unpleasing vigilance of scrutiny, and he was always glad to escape from Miss Hilda's presence after despatching, in the fewest possible words, such business as might be on hand. And yet it was to her that he owed a resource without which his evenings and leisure days would have become well nigh intolerable to him. As he lay one fine evening on a rock in front of the cottage in which he had his quarters, and looked wistfully at the fading coast of Ross, while he sighed to think of the barren hours which must elapse before he could hope to sleep and forget himself, a tall figure suddenly interposed between him

and the pale clear sky, and three old volumes were dropped at his feet.

'It's Montaigne's *Essays*,' said Miss Fife's calm cold voice; 'I'm disappointed in them. Probably they are beyond me. As you don't seem to tumble off to sleep after your supper, like James and Alick and the other animals, you may like to try them.'

Before he could scramble to his feet, or say a word of thanks, she was gone round the corner of the cottage, but the books were there! Little would the young squire of Swardham have believed that a day could ever come to him when he would seize with such rapture on three ancient books in dingy brown calf, and find in their discursive pages solace and company. It was an old edition with parallel pages, giving the original and also an English version. Per-

haps Miss Fife had contented herself with the latter; at any rate Jack, who, thanks to his mother's teaching, was a decent French scholar, tackled Montaigne in his vernacular, and found him excellent good reading. Before he had half finished the book, Mr. Fife, in his usual nervous, hesitating way, made him free of the contents of his library.

'There's very little besides works on natural history, botany, geology, and so on, but anything there is you may borrow just as you like.'

Jack wondered if the niece had put the old gentleman up to this welcome attention, and tried to coax his gratitude to rise and stifle his instinctive aversion. Wonderfully as this new resource aided him as the days began to shorten, and gratefully as he

acknowledged to himself the suitability of his surroundings for one who had given up ambition and all the battle of life, it was yet a hard struggle, renewed at some hour of every day, to keep up a brave heart and forbear overt indulgence in miserably unavailing regrets or in hopeless forecasts.

Do what he would, the poor fellow could not hinder himself from picturing what might now be going on at Swardham rectory; and, in the ingenuity of his self-torture, he had quite settled that Mary's only remaining sentiment for himself must be a hearty contempt, in which she would indulge herself at such times as her thoughts were not all given to the ardent and handsome Australian. Doubtless the woong had already made progress. What should hinder a girl from lending a willing ear to

a suitor of her own age, rich to boot, and favoured in his suit by the father on either side? Certainly no lingering kindness for a ruined, saddened man, who had nothing save love and brute strength to offer, and who had run away from her in the very moment of betraying his love. It was what he had hoped and intended when he wrote that miserable, evasive letter, when he fled in the stillness of early morning, not knowing whither he went. It was all right, and as it should be, and yet—and yet—it was torture to picture it all, as he pictured it twenty times a day in his island solitude.

He had written to the rector from Glasgow another evasive letter, in which he promised to write again as soon as he should be settled, and vaguely spoke of a berth in the Highlands, which would suit him 'down to

the ground.' But as yet he had written no more, and given his friend no opportunity of answering his letter. He would watch for the announcement of Mary's marriage in the papers, and then it would be time enough to renew correspondence with his sole remaining friend. Well did he know to what floods of dismayed remonstrance he would expose himself as soon as he should enlighten Holbrooke as to the manner of his present existence.

'The dear old rector,' he pondered often, 'he ought to be wiser, after his experiences as my tutor, but he persists in believing me capable of all sorts of great things, and *she*, poor innocent darling! formed her ideas on her father's estimate. They would think it degradation that I should be a keeper, no, fowler to an old gentleman who pays

me by the month. But I know myself—I was never fit for as much as my mother's son should have achieved; it was only money and position that bolstered me up, and now that my bolsters are gone to their real owner (much good may they do him!) I have found my level, and feel too old and battered to struggle for a rise. I don't think my mother will be less glad of me, if I am permitted to meet her again in the next world, because I have earned my bread in the only way in which I am competent to earn it.

'Oh, mother! how you suffered for me! but you are among the angels now, you have no share of earthly sorrows. What an insupportable business this life would be if it were not for that one bright hope of a tranquil hereafter, when death's work

will be undone, and hearts will cease to ache. Till then, what matter how one spends the remnants of one's days, so long as they are spent in the fear of the merciful God, who provides this hope when He takes away all else. Help me, O God, whom I half forgot in my prosperity, to repine at nothing, and prepare myself for a better life.'

Thus he would pray in his loneliness, but he could not kill the love, at once so sweet and so bitter, which had sprung up and flowered in one short hour of ecstasy, only to be crushed down and trodden out of sight, in obedience to the dictates of what he believed to be his duty as a man and as a friend.

CHAPTER VII.

ADOLPHUS TAKES A NEW DEPARTURE.

THE declining sun is streaming cheerfully through the windows of one of the more habitable drawing-rooms at Beausite, and shows mercilessly the stains upon the old Aubusson carpet, the holes, due to moths or cigar-ends, in the frayed curtains and dingy coverings of the furniture, the general shabbiness of the once handsome room, with its prim spindle-legged chairs and tables of the Adams' period, and cumbrous sofas of no period at all. At one end of

the room is a noisy group of three, who are engaged in the intellectual pastime of shooting with a puff and dart: their target being a great pompous portrait of the first Lord FitzRaymond, represented as in his wig and robes, and pointing with a roll of parchment to a foreshortened view of his mansion in the background. Loud are the screams of the Baroness d'Oisan when the earl lodges his dart in the pupil of his dignified ancestor's right eye, and thereby cuts out the lady, who has only pierced a curl of the full-bottomed wig.

'Ah! que tu es malin donc, toi! you did stand too close to the gros gran'papa; yes, you did; it is not fair, is it then, Jeemay?' but Captain Clancy is unable to answer the fair Belgian's appeal, being just then seized with a severe choking fit, caused by the

presence at the top of his wind-pipe of the woolly-headed dart, which, in incautiously fetching a vigorous breath, he had drawn backwards from the tube into his open mouth.

'No more of these beastly things for me,' he gasped at last, when he had dislodged the intruder amid loud laughter and much chaff from his friends; 'if we must pot the old fogies, let's have a saloon pistol and do the thing in style, instead of blocking one's throttle with an infernal tuft of worsted.'

At a distance from this noisy group Madame Meslin sits at an ancient upright piano, built in the days when Broadwood wrote himself, 'maker to His Majesty and the royal Princesses.' Her thin fingers are straying over the yellow keys, and making

queer tinkling music, and on one of the old instrument's little brackets, designed for the support of wax-lights, stands a tumbler half-filled with sherry-cobbler, with a straw immersed for suction. But neither her music nor her beverage seem to be occupying the lady's attention just now, for her head is turned over her lean shoulder, and she is smiling her sweetest on Adolphus West, who stands moodily beside the instrument.

'Yes,' she says softly, 'I depart; to morrow I am en voyage, and *she* also,' with a slight backward toss of the head towards the baroness—'she depart. Have she not told you? No? but she will; she have a design. Ah! when have she not designs? You, who are generous and rich and good, and Milor and his sister, who

are too kind and too confiding, I suffer to see a fat painted Dutch woman impose on you all three! And, as a friend, I counsel you lend her none of your money; believe not what she will say; that remittance from Bruxelle, it is three years that she expect it, all the months, and it come not, it will arrive never! This I warn you, as your friend, I who have always been your friend, yes, with Miladi G. also, when Lolotte d'Oisan said you had "la mine revèche"—that and other "injures" a thousand times! I am not like this Dutch vrow, I am honourable and I am true, and say not I expect remittance when no remittance will ever come. But I have been unlucky—I have lost to that Clancy and those others at cards much money—and I ask you, who are rich and always my

friend, to make me one little advance; but, listen! to make it on this only condition, that I hand you my parure of amethysts, superb! matchless! to be your security till I can repay.'

Madame Meslin's voluble tongue ceased at last, but she still struck random chords on the tuneless piano, while she peered up anxiously into West's face. It was intolerable, he felt: it was sheer impudence on this woman's part to try to pawn her rubbishing jewels with him. Why had the adorable Georgiana not presented herself sooner, and saved him from the clutches of this her unworthy friend? But it was something that the woman was going to take herself off, who had for ever been in his way.

'If five pounds will be of service to you,

madam, I will place that sum at your disposal, without depriving you of your ornaments.'

'Might I not hope,' says madame, persuasively, 'for three hundred francs? it is not a large sum, and the jewels——'

'I regret, madam, that I must abide by my offer,' and he stalked away to the window, disregarding the lady's effusive thanks as she stowed away a note which he had placed beside the tumbler.

'Hallo! West,' Lord FitzRaymond's cheery voice shouts, 'if you want Georgie, she's been doing the lazy under pretence of a headache, but I dare say she'll appear presently—you'd better come round with us and have a turn at pool.'

It was now acknowledged by the earl and his guests that West 'came after Georgie'

on his almost daily visits, and none seemed to trouble as to the probable sequel of his attentions to a lady in so peculiar a portion. No one, that is to say, in the free and easy coterie which haunted Beausite. But for ten miles round that 'tabooed' abode, men and women were still, as for months past, much engaged in watching and discussing the progress of Adolphus West's entanglement or infatuation, as they delighted to phrase it, and more than one attempt had been made to 'open the eyes' of the new squire of Swardham.

'We have done our duty,' said the Duchess of Hexham, solemnly—'a most ungrateful duty, but one clearly devolving on us, and we have been compelled to wash our hands of this unhappy young man, who will bewail his ruin too late.' Which being

interpreted meant that, at the instigation of Lady Emily, her Grace had more than once written bland notes, in the duke's name, bidding their new neighbour to partake of the hospitality of Marloes, and had experienced the mortification in each case of a coldly-worded refusal.

'Was there ever such a transparent old humbug?' had been Lady G.'s comment when the bland notes were exhibited at Beausite; 'to be sure she may be pardoned almost anything in the way of frantic attempts to plant the daughter on some unfortunate; for, inanimate iceberg as she seems in public, she has a frightful temper, and has led the old woman an awful life since her disappointment about your cousin. Do take pity on her, Adolphus; she is not more than six-and-thirty,

and you see she has set her heart on Swardham.'

But Adolphus had protested, with glances of unmistakable fervour, that one woman alone in Longshire, or in the world, should ever hold joint sway with him at Swardham, and that she was in all respects the opposite of Lady Emily Woodvil. Since his conversation with the earl, on the day when he had staved off an execution in the house of Beausite by the sacrifice of eighteen-hundred pounds, West had sought every opportunity of coming to a definite understanding with his enchantress, but he had sought in vain. No character was ever less tinged with sentiment than that of Lady G., and never again was she to be found, as he had once found her under stress of difficulties, in a tearful or even

serious mood. With wild gaiety, and playfulness which charmed while it chafed him, she had constantly repelled his advances, which she was able the more easily to do that she was never to be caught alone. One or other of her foreign friends was always within call, and was sure to be summoned if West ventured to express in set terms anything of his unconcealable admiration. The baffled lover would fain have complained of this treatment, but he lacked a confidant, for of the earl, in spite of his usual rough joviality, he stood somewhat in fear, having discovered that there were times when Lord FitzRaymond looked and talked as quite another being than the man who romped with Lolotte, and gloried in the sport of ratting. The earl was in a manner pledged to be his friend. He had

borrowed his money. He had approved the idea of sending a confidential messenger to the Black Sea, to ascertain, if possible, the fate of Aylmer FitzRaymond. He had furnished the said messenger (who was a brother of the useful Mr. Clark at Longborough) with such hints as he could supply, which to be sure did not amount to much, as he had not seen his cousin for years, nor ever heard from him. But he had expressed a very decided opinion that, till something definite resulted from Mr. Peter Clark's mission, his sister must be let alone on certain subjects.

'It's a ticklish position for a woman, you see, and though Georgie can take good care of herself, no one better, I shouldn't like her bothered. Of course you're awfully kind and all that, and I wish you every

ultimate success; but for the present just bottle up your feelings, like a good fellow.

So it came to pass that, though Adolphus West was understood to be coming after Lady G., no one at Beausite talked of any sort of engagement or provisional pledge between them, or accorded such facilities to them as are usually granted to an engaged pair. This was no doubt agreeable to the lady, but far from pleasant to West, who nevertheless continued to flutter round her as a moth around a lamp, deriving little pleasure from his visits, yet wretched if a day passed without his presence in the untidy rooms and amid the uncongenial guests at Beausite.

On this sunny afternoon in early winter West had presented himself in a most

dejected frame of mind, having just received a long budget from Mr. Peter Clark. This private detective wrote from Varna, detailing a weary and fruitless pilgrimage, in which he had learned nothing of the recreant Aylmer, but had expended so much money that he was constrained modestly to apply for further supplies. How cruel a fate it was, on such a day, to be denied a consoling sight of that little figure, ever trim and fresh among her dingy surroundings, to miss the sparkle of those wicked dark eyes, and the easy banter which, though unsatisfying, was better than nothing when it rolled from that rosebud mouth. How odious by contrast was the sallow French harpy, with her impudent attack upon his purse. But if she were really going, she and also the other woman,

perhaps on his next visit all would be reversed, and he might enjoy an uninterrupted hour with his goddess.

As he stood at the window, drumming with his fingers on the panes, and gazing discontentedly upon the weedy drive and ragged grass plots, he saw Lady G. slip from the little side door, by which she had first introduced him to the house, and turn down a path which led through shrubberies to a walled garden. In a moment his moody dejection vanished, and without a word to the others who were still hanging about in their noisy chaff and practical jokes, he snatched his hat and started in pursuit. Hurriedly he escaped from the house and threaded the narrow walk, and in a few minutes he was rewarded by catching sight of his quarry as she sauntered beneath the

dark laurels. How graceful she looked; how elegant her gait. She had covered her head with a wide-awake belonging to her brother, and her dark serge dress was of the plainest fashion; but as his eye dwelt on her slim waist, her short clustering curls and slender neck, he thought that no splendours of apparel could have added a charm, and his breast throbbed with fierce longing to be done with delay and suspense, and boldly claim her for his own. Another moment and he had overtaken her, had touched her cool small hand, and was pacing by her side, while she talked to him with her usual unembarrassed friendliness, and in her usual light vein of frivolous gaiety. But to-day he had no reply for her, he did not hear what she was saying, and presently she faced him, breathing

hard as he was in utter dumbness, and asked abruptly—

'What's the matter with you?'

He was a puny fellow, with little about him to redeem the insipidity of his pale complexion and pale red hair, but just now he was terribly in earnest, and never had he appeared more manly than when he answered with a desperate cry.

'I love you, Georgiana! I love you! Now you know it if you never guessed it before, and I must have your answer. Will you be my wife?'

The rich colour deepened on Lady G.'s smooth cheek, and then faded before his vehemence. She looked distractedly on this side and on that, but of escape or succour there was no chance. The evil moment had come: what was she to say to him?

'You have heard my story,' she murmured at last, 'and yet you ask me to be your wife. No,' interrupting a burst of passionate protestation, 'that is not the point; what you feel, or what I might feel in return, has nothing to do with it. The question is, what would Aylmer FitzRaymond say if he lives and could hear you?'

Staggered, but not discomfited, West then poured out his tale anent the embassy of Peter Clark.

'He has not got at absolute certainty yet,' he concluded, 'but he is sure to do so soon, and I must, yes, I must have something to keep me up until the suspense is ended. May I hope? say I may hope!'

For a long moment Lady G. was silent, and when she spoke it was neither a direct

answer nor even a comment on the measures taken, without her instance, to free her from a wife's shackles.

'Do you think you do well,' she said at last in a hard and almost scornful tone, 'to seek to tie yourself to one whose love and constancy towards a husband you rate as low as mine? Ah! you are blinded now by what I suppose you call your passion, but one day you might not thank me, if I encouraged you—if I were proved free to encourage you.'

His face grew white, and his voice faltered and grew piteous.

'Because you have been wasted on a man who did not prize you as he ought, are you to waste yourself on to the end?'

'Waste!' she cried harshly, 'who talks of such waste to me? If I can kill each day

as it comes, and never have time to think—it may be waste to the notions of some, but it suits me, and I am fit for no other life—even to the end, as you say. I will be frank with you. I do not love the man who married me—not now—not for years past—No. If he is dead, so much the better. If he lives, but is so living that I can legally demand to be loosed from a tie that has long in fact dwindled to nothing but a legal fetter, I will not refuse my freedom if it is offered to me. But, Mr. West, I do not love you; how can a woman placed as I am love any man? If you were wise you would go this very minute, you would call in pride to your aid, and bless your stars, this day six months, that you had escaped. But I can see that you are at present proof against the sager counsels. You say that I may

learn to love you? Ah! I am too old, I think, to learn. But neither do I say I will not listen to you as soon as I am assured that I am free to hear such words. Meanwhile, if your patience lasts and you do not fling up the game, as, mind you, a wiser man would do, there must be no repetition of this; we must, if we are to meet as usual, be as we were, or as I thought we were, till this morning. These, you understand, are my terms, and I faithfully promise you a fair hearing if all goes well and you abide by them.'

'Ah,' he said, reproachfully, 'you know I can refuse no terms, neither can I keep away from you. If the suspense lasts long, I think I shall go mad.'

'Now that's nonsense,' she returned in her usual light and sprightly man-

ner, 'which you, who have a thousand resources, should blush to utter. Must I find you occupation? well, will you do as I bid?'

Of course he swore that he was hers to command, even to the death.

'It's nothing deadly,' she said, laughing, 'and on the contrary, it will be very good for you. You know that a general election is impending, long as it has been delayed. Well, you must stand for the county, as so many Wests of Swardham have done before you, and I'll make you the most killing rosettes for your button-hole.'

'But they were Tories,' he said, aghast, 'rank Tories, and what is more, no one but a Tory would have a chance of being returned.'

'And what else should you be?' she

replied with a pretty look of disdain; 'you can't suppose that I would *look* at a Radical candidate.'

It had never occurred to him that Lady G. had any political creed or sympathies; but now he took her word for gospel, and was dumb-foundered to such a degree that even his love-troubles were driven for the moment from his head. Lady G. did not fail to observe the effect of her random shot, and fancying that she had found a way of saving herself from much of the awkwardness of the near future, returned with such urgency to the charge that sentiment was driven from the field.

When Adolphus West rode home that evening in the moonlight, he was grappling with the tremendous fact that he had got to turn his coat, that he was pledged to step

down into the arena of county politics, not as a red-hot reformer, not even as the tamest of Whigs, but as a true-blue Conservative champion of all that in his ardent youth he had cursed as the bane and canker of the land, and devoted in many a public utterance to speedy annihilation. Gulp it down as he might, he was humiliated; nay, almost terror-struck in the abasement of his inner consciousness. But he was no longer his own man, and like a knight-errant of old, was ready to do or die in fulfilling the behests of his 'ladye love.'

CHAPTER VIII.

UN MAUVAIS QUART D'HEURE.

THE dissolution of parliament, prophesied by Lady Georgiana, actually took place, to the rage and mortification of almost every sitting member except the mighty Liberal premier, within three months of the conversation recorded in the last chapter, within a few weeks indeed of the resumption of political business in February. 'He might have waited over the recess,' shouted a chorus of injured and apprehensive representatives; 'the fact is he

hates sportsmen and country gentlemen, and would like to make it impossible for any such to sit on either side of the house—what else can he mean by plunging us into a general election in the hunting season?' He has shown himself callous enough under snubs that would have made some men resign office six months ago—why can't he rub on over another session?' 'Confound these men of colossal genius, you never know where to have them, unless there is some practical chap to keep them well in hand, and curb their confounded impulsiveness—turn them off and on in short like the gas.' 'Dear old Palmerston! he would never have played us such tricks.'

But amid the varied notes of the grumblers, chafing uselessly against the will of Britain's fate—the Inevitable, the Grand, the

Versatile chief-elder—no wail proceeded from the shakiest seat's occupant expressive of half the agony which tortured one individual, who in the shuffling seemed to have nothing to lose, if not any likelihood of gaining much. It had been all very well while a pair of bold dark eyes were flashing, and a curly head was tossed so saucily, and a delicious breath fanned his cheek, for an enraptured mortal to surrender at discretion or no discretion at all. It was perfectly true, as those rosy lips had pertinently urged, that instances of political tergiversation have never been rare. Had not a long-descended earl, a pillar of successive Conservative cabinets, seen fit to recant the opinions which had guided his own earlier course and had been dear to his distinguished sire and his forbears, and actually

so to trim his sails that, with short interval, he was presently exhibited to admiring men and angels as a member of the Liberal government? Had not the amiable but eccentric Oberon Philbert, brother of another great Conservative earl, and ex-minister, passed, in one hour as it were, from sounding into the ears of young Oxford that tremendous warning (chosen for the motto of his own creation the True-blue Club), 'The mob lacks bridles, the throne loyalty, the altar awe,' to a mission which expressed itself in fraternal intercourse with day-labourers and advocacy of opinions so advanced as to find favour for a season in the eyes of the most radical borough in the midlands? And did not justice demand for Toryism a set-off, a counter-poise for these derelictions? Such and such like was

now the burden of Lady G.'s song as often as her admirer sought her presence. Frivolity seemed to have fled Beausite with the baroness and the French lady, and to have been replaced by that unquiet guest ambition. Lady G. could plead a cause eloquently enough when she had a mind, and exhibited more acquaintance with political metamorphoses than could have been expected from a butterfly who had flitted away to so many foreign shores. She had conquered, and her victim dared not shirk his penance, though in the solitude of his great house he was keenly and crushingly alive to his own utter degradation.

Selfish and shallow as Adolphus West was by nature, tinged as his early sentiments had been by much that was ignoble

and petty, it was yet terrible to the man to avow himself a turn-coat, and in the same breath court the favour of the Longshire electors as a Conservative candidate. He tried to take comfort in the undeniable, not to say historical, instances quoted by the Circe whose rod had smitten him, but he felt sure, all the while, that neither the Lord Slideley of Barterstaffe, nor Mr. Philbert, could have executed the 'right-about-face' had the ranks they deserted been composed of such folk as his own early friends, against whom he was to turn traitor. Conservatives he fancied to be a slack and sedentary race, whose utmost wrath and indignation might be borne without much discomfort. But radicals! the radicals, especially, of Longborough; and how close, alas! was Longborough to Swardham. He quaked, and his teeth

almost chattered as he pictured to himself the stinging taunts and crushing vituperation of many a once familiar demagogue. Happy were it for him if their disgust stopped short at words; but well he knew of what excesses a Longborough mob is capable; and with a shudder he recalled a scene in which an unpopular lecturer had been hauled and hustled into helplessness, then well-nigh smothered in red ochre, and finally pitched into a dirty brook, not innocent of sewage. Oh why, why must the evil hour be thus precipitated? Wherefore could the premier not rest content, even with a dwindling majority, and spare him, if but for a season, an ordeal so harrowing, so *dangerous?*

In the very miserable hours which must perforce be spent under a roof sheltering

only himself and his hired servants, Adolphus might have become ill, or downright distracted, but for the frequent presence of Mr. Clark the solicitor, from Longborough. The ex-watchmaker would indeed, amid all his troubles, have scouted the notion of friendship between himself and a person so humble as his legal adviser; but solitude being unbearable, and the attorney both useful and unassuming, it so fell out that a snug chamber in Swardham Hall was soon known as Mr. Clark's room, and seldom long lacked its tenant. And Mr. Clark's devotion certainly seemed unbounded, while it never trenched on undue familiarity. It had led, indeed, to his secession from the firm in which he had been partner on a fixed salary of no very liberal amount.

The Messrs. Scott were old-fashioned people, somewhat prim and stiff, proud to be accounted scrupulous. They had not been indifferent to the advantage of retaining their old connection with Swardham under the new rule; but they had soon both given and taken offence in their dealings with Adolphus West. The new squire's treatment of his cousin, his absence of finer feeling in the recovery of the arrears, the peremptory dismissal of the old servants, the stoppage of one or two small pensions, were in the eyes of the Messrs. Scott actions which must not be supposed to have had their sanction. In Mr. West's manner to themselves, and the tone of his letters, they discerned 'much to which they had never been accustomed in a long experience.' Thus it was that their dis-

pleasure was not untempered with relief when, their junior partner having respectfully announced his intention of setting up in business for himself, it was presently revealed that the Swardham business was to follow the seceder to his smart new office in Town-hall Street, where the most was made, to be sure, of the japanned tin boxes labelled with the honoured name of West.

'Joy go with them,' old Daniel Scott had said, magnanimously, as the boxes were cleared from their old accustomed nooks; 'I don't grudge them to Dick Clark, if he inclines to stomach their owner's little ways.'

'Clark was always a bit of a time-server,' said his son and partner, looking rather ruefully upon the shelves. 'Well, well,

he has his way to make, and perhaps can't afford to be too particular; but there may be things which even he won't stomach from a client—not if he remembers his training.'

Truth to tell there *was* much in Mr. Clark's intercourse with Adolphus West which was not quite easy to digest. The great man was supercilious, unreasonable, often insolent, but, almost in spite of himself, he was daily learning to depend more and more on his confidential adviser, who perfectly understood his patron's unenviable plight, whether in affairs of love or party war.

One evening, early in March, Clark had driven himself over from Longborough, intending to dine and sleep at Swardham Hall. He was a neat, dapper little man,

rosy and clean-shaven, and presented a creditable figure in his correct evening dress, when ushered into the room where West sat. This gentleman had not thought it necessary to honour his guest by changing his rough suit of coloured tweeds. His feet were thrust into slippers of yellow leather, and his pale red hair might have been smoother, and, truth to tell, the hands thrust into his side-pockets cleaner. Just as he was, however, when he acknowledged the other's greeting with a surly nod, he presently shuffled into the adjoining room whence dinner had been announced, leaving his guest to follow him unbidden, and flung himself into a chair to swallow his meal in silence.

At railway speed dinner was despatched under the auspices of a butler and two

nimble footmen, and the two men, declining wine or dessert, returned to the room (it had been John West's own sitting-room) where they had met. After some talk on fines, leases, and threats of distraint or distress, during which West seemed so preoccupied as scarcely to follow the other's drift; and a brief inquiry as to the present whereabouts of the absent cousin Peter, which was answered in terms most uncomplimentary to that absent gentleman, the approaching election became the topic.

In spite of West's uneasy pride and constant effort to keep his inferior at a vast distance, he had not been able to conceal the nature and extent of his terrors, though he tried to make up for any damaging admissions by an extra dash of scornful irritability.

To-night he was very hard on an address to the free and independent electors of Longshire which Clark had composed and now brought over for his approval. It was not in fact a bad address, considering that in it the best had to be made of a business that could hardly be called good, but it found no favour with him for whose mouth the words were designed. In one breath he stigmatized each paragraph as bald and bombastic, as transparently false and absurdly candid, as too trite and too abstruse. Style, matter, length were all alike declared faulty; never was candidate pestered with such a wilful and incompetent subordinate.

Poor Clark bore all these snubs and railings with singular patience and temper, but he cannot have been sorry when at last the

colloquy was interrupted by a disturbance in the lobby on which the room gave. With a scowl the master of the house flung down the broad-sheet, and bidding Clark ring the bell, applied himself to listen to sounds which seemed to be approaching the door, and suggested a sort of scuffle between two persons, one of whom was heard to exclaim excitedly—

'No you don't! not if I know it, you don't hopen that door, you hunder-bred hintruder.'

Recognizing amid the profusion of aspirates the voice of his butler, West himself threw the door wide open, and in furious tones demanded what the meaning of such uproar might be. In the semi-darkness he beheld his servant's back as it was slowly propelled towards him by some person

unseen, round whose neck the man seemed to be hanging in a vain attempt to stay his progress. In this absurd fashion the pair advanced, till, on hearing his master's angry tones close upon him, the butler suddenly unclasped his embrace, and wheeling round unmasked the sturdy figure of his antagonist, an elderly man with a shining bald head and a wide, good-tempered mouth—a man clad in homely hodden grey, with plenty of clay on his thick-soled boots. Easily pushing aside the servant, who was pursy and panting, this person stretched out a huge hairy hand to the master, and, his big mouth widening with a grin, exclaimed heartily—

'Ay, it's worth all the pother I've had to get at ye, even lugging fifteen stun round the neck of me, which is not far short of

some mill-stones, I'll warrant; but there, my boy, my old heart warms at sight of you, that it does.' And Mr. Barnett, demagogue and agitator as he was, looked as though he spoke in good earnest.

As to West, for a moment he fairly gaped open-mouthed at the old friend who was violently shaking one of his puny passive hands, then, partially recovering himself, he fiercely bade the butler begone, and, dropping into an arm-chair began to bite his lower lip, a trick which came all the more natural to him in moments of perturbation, from his buck-teeth and the receding structure of his lower jaw.

Without appearing to notice his reception, Barnett took a seat, and wiping his forehead with a good-humoured "Whew," said, with a glance at Clark—

'I've got to apologize to this gentleman for breaking in on his talk with my young friend, to whom, as he is also an old friend, I shan't offer an apology. It's not the first time we have met in Swardham parish, is it, Dolf, my boy?'

Mr. Clark coughed, slightly bowed, and looked towards his principal, who lay back in his chair, covering with one hand his working jaws, but, beyond breathing hard, uttered no sound.

'Nay,' Barnett resumed, without a change of tone, 'I trust I have not offended by that familiarity. The old name slipped out by chance; to have used it purposely were neither right nor fitting, *now* and *here*. But I must begin on what brings me here to-night, and if I am right in fancying you would rather hear me and answer me (in

case, as I expect, you favour me with audience and answer) with no third person by, perhaps—" and he broke off and looked at Clark.

From behind West's hand, however, came a mumbled sentence which seemed to convey his pleasure that Mr. Clark should by no means withdraw.

'Then,' said Barnett earnestly, 'I take it as an omen that your reply will be such as I fain would hear; for if unhappily it were otherwise, if you were not going to rebut what scandal seeks to fix on you, you would scarcely care to have a witness by to hearken to your shame and to the indignation it might provoke. But no,' he went on in gentler tones (and, rough fellow as he looked, he was orator enough to possess and use at will stops as it were of almost tender

expression), 'no, I for one do not believe in the possibility of *that*. That your head should be a bit turned at first—that most of your old associates, and some of your old ideals, should seem out of all keeping with your present surroundings — all that is natural enough at your age, when things have come about like a fairy tale, with you for the hero of a transformation scene. And if a woman is at the bottom of some of the changes in you, why that's natural too. But when they try to paint you real black, when they make out that you are so corrupted by a short spell of riches as to be crushing and grinding those whom it is your duty and privilege to lift and free, to be living with wantons and sharpers, to neglect every duty of your station, and even to threaten, as a crowning act of effrontery, to

enter the lists as champion of all that your life was spent in denouncing, and deadly foe of all that you professed to hold sacred and dear—why, my answer is, I will not believe it, till from the lad's own lips I hear it! And now, Mr. West, my presence is explained, and I crave your pardon if I have transgressed in the warmth of my language, and say, for God's sake, sir, and your own fair fame, give me a plain answer.'

But from Adolphus West no intelligible answer came. He only lay there in his chair and cowered, his heart beating so furiously as really to obstruct his speech. He had always been a bit afraid of Barnett in the old days, and now the man's coming scorn seemed to loom upon him horribly. Turning his white face towards Clark, he

loosed by a look that gentleman's glib tongue.

'Now, really, really, my friend, you try Mr. West's forbearance sorely, you do indeed; so much so that his self-control is admirable in refraining from a severe retort. When your tirade is reduced to a plain question, and stripped of extraneous matter, of which much should never have been imported, I suppose it amounts to this: "Is Mr. West intending to stand for the county, and if so on what platform? Am I right in sifting down your verbosity to this?'

'Sir,' said Barnett slowly, while he looked wistfully at the pitiful figure crouching in the arm-chair, 'I will take the answer to that inquiry as a token by which the answers to others may be interpreted.'

'Then, sir,' Clark proceeded briskly,

'learn, since it concerns you, that Mr. West *is* about to contest one of the seats for this division of Longshire, and that, in accordance with family tradition, and, I may add, with the inherent fitness of things, it is as a Conservative, and warm supporter of the throne, the Church, and the ancient constitution, that he will solicit the suffrages of the electors, among whom I imagine that you, sir, are *not* numbered.'

Disregarding this gallant attempt to divert the stream of his wrath, Barnett arose and stood over Adolphus West with clenched hand outstretched. As he strove to find words he saw the renegade shrink away from him, and broke into a savage laugh.

'Nay, squire, I'm not going to strike your cringing body with this fist, I leave violence

to paid ruffians round your hustings. But if scorn can hurt, if the contempt and disgust of every honest man in this county can sting, you are like to be sore and smarting for some time to come. I'll not waste words on anything so base, your silence and cowardly demeanour since I came into this room has been more eloquent than your friend here. I am answered, and I will go back to my friends at Longboro' (*your* friends once), and tell them, You were right and I was wrong. The fellow we knew as Dolf Van Lennep *was* an impostor, and *is* a craven and degraded hound, a traitor to his past, a disgrace to his present, a byword for the future.'

Sonorously rolled the words of a voice that had filled many a public hall, and passionate was the final anathema.

'Moderate your language, if you please,' cried the scandalized attorney; 'you seem to forget your disclaimer of violence. It is to moderate men and moderate measures only that the public looks for safety and guidance.'

In his perplexity caused by the utter collapse of his principal, Mr. Clark had quoted a sentence of his address, and unexpectedly enough the harmless platitude served to turn aside the current of Barnett's wrath.

'Moderate!' he cried in trumpet tones, facing the dapper little man in his neat attire, 'ay, that is the cry of you, men who fatten on the rottenness of the old worn-out codes; but you will *not* impose your cry on a public that reads and thinks. Moderate! Would you have your friend *moderately* honest? the soldiers and sailors

that fight for you *moderately* brave? your wife *moderately* chaste? Away with such shams, and speak out your meaning; "It does not suit us to have you in earnest, because you are down and we want to keep you down." So we are to shut our eyes and stop our ears and fold our hands, and let old abuses reign for our day also, and grovel on as we were born to grovel, and for our reward we shall be told that we are law-abiding, *moderate*, free from dangerous extremes and revolutionary ideas! Thank you, lawyer, in the name of my fellows, thank you. Had you not better study us a little closer before you talk or write about us? I will charge you nothing for the hint, nor for another which should be worth many a six-and-eightpence to your employer there, which is briefly this. If he perseveres

in going to the poll this election as a true-blue (God save the mark !), let this gallant knight of the shire give a wide berth to Longborough, or he may cut a more currish figure than he cuts at this moment, and *that* before a more mixed company.'

With this Barnett strode from the room and the house, none staying him, and betook himself home to Longborough on foot as he had come, through mud and mire.

CHAPTER IX.

LEAP-YEAR DOINGS.

TWICE had the heather bloomed amid the barren rocks of Sconsay since John Wood's arrival in the isle, and the return of August, attracting to the neighbouring shores of Ross many a sportsman intent on grouse or stags, and many a steamer laden with tourists, found Mr. Fife's fowler restless and ill at ease. It was not that his isolation had already become insupportable, or his daily employments distasteful. His inner man was still too stiff and sore with

the bruises of the past to have allowed this luckless *ci-devant* to quarrel with homely tasks and fare, or to peep forth even in the shyest fashion from the island obscurity to which he had fled, content to forget the honours and luxuries of his former life.

On two women, one in heaven, the other in a distant Longshire rectory, which seemed to him the sweetest spot on earth, the thoughts of his lonely heart dwelt often indeed and yearningly; but his own loss was so entirely his mother's gain, that he could wait in patience till the veil between them should be done away. Perhaps he had not schooled himself to own as unreservedly that his lost love also had, out of slight and speedy loss, the loss of the lover of an hour, reaped gain, permanent and all-

satisfying. But at least he told himself over and over again that such was the case, and that it would have been a mean and selfish requital of trusting friendship if the landless man, flung upon the world at thirty, had availed himself of a sweet girl's pitying impulse, and cheated his friend's only child of a brilliant settlement in life, by entangling her in a hopeless engagement. It was not, however, from out of the past that trouble had just now gathered over John Wood. Neither from his mother's grave, nor from Mary's betrothal to another, nor from his lost inheritance could thoughts arise to beset him which should knit his brow with such well-nigh whimsical perplexity as was now evident there.

He lay one hot forenoon stretched full-length on a low cliff's edge, and as he

jerked the smoke from his pipe right and left to daunt, if possible, the midges (the torment of the region), he had no eye for birds, rare or common, though hundreds of gulls were on the wing, and sandpipers ran along the strip of beach below him. There was a shoal of gurnet, making a rough patch on the level deep, which the gulls did not fail to note. There they clustered, swimming upon the water that heaved with the finny crowd; but the listless watcher troubled himself with no speculations as to their doings—whether they bit pieces out of the luckless fish who were forced above water by their brethren below, or in what other manner they made it worth their while to wait upon the shoal. Far less mysterious were the tactics of the great white gannet who presently appeared. From

aloft his keen eye marked a fish, and, furling his wings, down he shot headlong, like some aerolite that has come within our globe's attraction, and smote the water with a heavy splash; then in an instant had risen with his prey and glided away. Neither of these things did he take note, nor had he any pleasure in the scent, aromatic and refreshing beyond many highly-lauded vegetable odours, drawn by the sunbeams from the thick carpet of crow-berry on which he lay—a carpet of myriad fragrant leaves, resting on thick undergrowth as brown and, apparently, sere as cocoa-nut fibre. Hard by a little stream of amber-tinted water ran to the cliff's edge in its channel, bowered in spice-breathing gale (or bog-myrtle), and jumped down the steep in whose face it had worn a groove, a coign of vantage for

many an exquisite tuft of fern. But to-day he heeded not the hurrying water, nor peered down among the burnished fronds rejoicing in the spray of the little cataract. He was not even smoking as if he thoroughly enjoyed his tobacco, for at last he allowed his pipe to slip from his mouth and expire upon the crowberry leaves, as he muttered aloud—

'I must get out of this. Yes. I *must.* Oh, confound the woman! I could almost wish I had let such a wild uncomfortable creature drown.'

He laughed a rather mirthless laugh as he ended his soliloquy, of which the origin and occasion must be briefly told.

It had chanced, one hot afternoon in July, that Miss Hilda Fife, bathing according to her wont in a small bay set apart

for her use, was tempted by her delight in the newly-acquired art of swimming to venture further out than was prudent, and, in her return, was in such manifest difficulties, that her attendant, a Highland girl, presently began to make the shore echo with her wails and shrieks.

It was lucky for Miss Fife that her maid possessed sound lungs, and used them in preference to swooning dumbly at sight of her mistress' distress, for before the young lady had ceased to beat the water with aching and fast-stiffening limbs, a man, summoned by the screaming, appeared on the heathery brow, and in a moment, taking the water like a Newfoundland dog, swam to the imperilled maiden.

John Wood was a strong swimmer, but he had never before attempted to

save a drowning person, and his own after-impression was that his first essay, though in the main successful, was a bungling business. He was obliged, in the first place, to be stern and peremptory (if not rude and violent, as to himself he phrased it) in dictating to Miss Hilda the conditions (as to amount of clasp allowable) on which alone he could possibly convey her to shore. Again, he was sure that in more practised hands the poor terrified creature might have been more gracefully and deftly handled, and spared perhaps the swallowing of an extra pint or so of salt water. At any rate he was immensely relieved when, after some yards of ungainly progress by swimming, he ventured to let down his feet, and, finding himself well within his depth, walked ashore, half

carrying, half dragging Miss Fife, all swathed in a voluminous blue bathing-dress. He had kicked off his boots before taking to the water, and hurt his toes exasperatingly in floundering among the stones. Stumbling and swaying, he could scarcely hold on to the limp figure till it could be thrust into the arms of the maid, who was capering wildly on the beach, and boldly ran ankle-deep into the ocean to receive her mistress. This achieved, he hobbled off to his boots and disappeared in a trice. He had played his part—indifferently enough, he considered—and the lady, who was not seriously damaged, would be glad to be relieved of his presence.

As in duty bound, however, Wood looked in at his employer's in the course of the afternoon to inquire how Miss Fife found

herself, and if there were any orders for him. And so far was he from crediting the affair with any romance, or himself with any heroism, that he had made up his mind, in case he saw the lady, to tender humble apologies for his rough and unskilful usage of her, which he really thought might have provoked her displeasure.

It was a full week since he had had sight of Robert Fife. The old man had been poorly, and unable to interest himself in his usual pursuits, or to enjoy a chat with the treasure of a young man whom his brothers in the city had found him, when he had wearied of all the sons of Gael. John West was not therefore surprised when he was shown into a room where in solitary state sat Miss Fife, robed in a wrapper which looked not unlike the bathing-dress, and wearing a white

shawl flung mantilla-wise over her straight, lustreless black hair.

At sight of him she clasped her hands tightly over her knee, and fixed her gaze on him, but spoke no word till he had once or twice asked if there were any orders. Then she rose, and tottering to him, took his two hands in her own, standing facing him. To his dismay he saw her pale features working in preparation for an unmistakable crying fit, in terror of which he began to stammer out a humble apology for disturbing her at so improper a time.

But Hilda was not to be stayed. Wringing his hands, she gasped, as tears rushed from her eyes, 'You have saved my life! Noble, admirable man! I shall live only to requite you for risking your own life for mine. And as she ended she swayed for-

ward in such fashion that she was almost on his breast, her long straight hair even swinging against his shoulder.

'Miss Fife,' he said, in low distressed tones, 'you are ill and agitated, you are not yourself, and I—I am your uncle's hired servant, who has done no more than plainest, commonest duty, such as is owed to the care of any living creature in a master's possession,' and he made an unsuccessful effort to release his hands.

But, still weeping, Hilda burst out, 'Nay, nay, I admire you the more for your reserve, but I know all. Since the week after your arrival I have known who and what you really are, and' (she added with kindling tones and heaving breast) 'in that knowledge I feel no shame to say, Take

me, if you will have me—my truth, my devotion, and (what is less in value, but to you most expedient), my fortune. All are yours if you will, all are wasted if you refuse.'

Trembling and shaking she loosed his hands, and sinking into a chair, covered her eyes with her own.

The bewildered man's first thought was silently to dart a passing anathema at Auchmuty the phrenologist and all his devices, his next how he might decline, with equal resolution and courtesy, this startling and unwelcome proposal. Though his instinctive antipathy was rife within him, he deeply pitied the irrepressible emotion of this woman, usually so cold and collected, and could not but own that her purpose seemed as generous as it was wild and impossible. In the

gentlest tones he could command he began—

'Miss Fife, if you really know my story, such as it is, you know that, no matter what my birth and previous life have been, I am at this moment simply what I appear, your uncle's servant, with no reasonable prospect of ever occupying a higher position. Let this be enough to seal your lips for ever as to the honour which, in an overwrought hour of excitement, you have deigned to extend to me. Let the fact of your having done so be blotted from both our minds, and spare me the pain of adding reasons why, even if we were more equal in position, no such thing could be between us.'

He bowed respectfully, and took a step toward the door, but had to bear the brunt of yet another appeal, more impassioned,

more theatrical as it seemed to him, than the former.

'There spake not the cool, brave man who perilled his life this morning, who saw the right thing to do and did it unhesitatingly. What! content to grovel on amid soulless hinds? It must not be. What though you cannot love me as you might have loved some girl chosen in your prosperous days, though I may not please your eye as another might! should such things so weigh with you that you will none of the hand which could place you once more among your peers, and reopen the gates of honourable ambition to you? Take me and mine, and *I* will warrant that you shall never repent that you have either. Nay, in a short year you shall love me as you would not, after the same space,

love the choice of your untroubled hours.'

She had risen to her feet as she spoke with increasing animation and ardour, and with outstretched hands she stood before him. Never had Hilda Fife's lineaments been lit up into anything so nearly approaching to beauty; but it was a far-differing image which reigned in the listener's heart and forbade his faltering where many a man, fancy-free or otherwise, might have succumbed, or at least hesitated.

'I have said my say,' he murmured, in a pained voice, 'and grateful as I ought to be for your interest in a ruined man, it only remains for me to leave you at once, and, for such time as I remain on this island, spare you if possible any approach

which may recall this painful interview to your remembrance.'

Then he retired, and this time the lady made no sign or sound to detain him. From that day the little world of Sconsay had seen no more of the laird's niece, whose outdoor activity seemed for a while to be lost. It was rumoured indeed among the boatmen, gardeners, and herds that Miss Hilda was busied in tending her uncle, whose indisposition proved more serious than had been imagined.

Under these circumstances Mr. Fife's fowler found his occupation gone, and dreading the long idle days, bringing nothing to beguile him from sad thoughts; and the nights unblest by sleep, the reward of bodily toil, became an energetic fisherman, or worked at the oar, while Alick and Ham-

ish, in their clumsy boat, fished for 'lythe, round submerged rocks, or, with a long drag-net, swept a little bay of flounders and soles.

There were days, however, when the 'soulless hinds' utterly refused to launch their bark, preferring to make the most of unchecked idleness while the rare luxury could be enjoyed; and such days, despite of Montaigne, lagged terribly, for all the summer skies, the smiling seas of blue, framed amid bold stretches of rugged coast or peaks of fantastic outline.

On such a day it was that John Wood lay, as described, spurning the fragrant leafage with restless feet, and longing for the first moment in which he could have speech of his employer, and arrange for speedy departure from this island, which could no

longer hold himself and Miss Hilda Fife. Twice, since he had fled her presence, had a note reached him, brought in distasteful stealth and secrecy by the handmaid. In the former of these Miss Fife solemnly adjured him to have done with false pride, false shame, or whatever else had induced him to reject her offer. The precise value of the offer was then more plainly stated. The lady had, as it appeared, inherited from her late parents no less a sum than fifteen thousand pounds, and had for a dozen years spent hardly a tithe of her income. Both capital and accumulations were at her sole disposal. With this fortune she again, in precise and business-like terms, proposed to endow the man who had saved her life, if he wisely decided to avail himself of her proffer.

'It is a cool judgment and a shrewd head which I desire to devote to your interests,' she wrote, 'though you may wrongly conclude that my present forwardness is compatible with no such qualities. I am not ignorant that you have suffered from a woman's heartlessness in a time of sore trial. Let another woman atone for that fault, and reverse all that then befell.'

But on the advantages likely to accrue from an alliance with Miss Fife's shrewdness, or her thousands, John West dwelt not for one moment. She was, to be sure, unconscious that his heart cherished a woman's image who was not Lady Emily; but that she should pursue a reluctant man, whose secret she had surprised, or think his resolution so easily to be sapped, filled him with anger and almost disgust. in

which all sense of her generosity was lost. He returned no answer to the note, though opportunity was given him for such answer. And his anxiety to begone from Sconsay increased. Then, at an interval of five days, had come a second note. The former, to his chagrin, began by addressing him as 'Dear Mr. West:' this had no formal beginning; and ran as follows:

'You are then one of those who, refusing to help themselves, justly forfeit all future aid of Providence. In your fall, you seem to have lost more than wealth and station—and the best that can now be wished for you is that no long tenure shall be yours of an existence sunken and degraded, unredeemed even by an instinct of self-preservation.'

This pelting of hard words indited in

spitefully spiky characters, but with unfaltering fingers, came as a relief to the man to whom the writer was most formidable in her melting mood, and who dreaded a renewal of softer addresses.

The danger then was over! For that he devoutly thanked Heaven. But it behoved him none the less to spare Miss Fife the aggravation of his presence. To what might she not be goaded, were she to witness much more of the 'sunken and degraded existence,' which she found so objectionable? There was no sting in such a taunt, for, sunken as he was in worldly estate, he felt that degradation would begin for him when he should seek to regain material prosperity by any dishonourable expedient, and among all such expedients there was none more hateful to him than such barter as is im-

plied in a loveless match with a wealthy woman. For the fiftieth time he was debating with himself, this fair sunny day, whether it might not be best to take French leave, and, when next he should find himself near to the coast of Ross, prevail on his friends the fishermen to set him ashore. He did not like the plan—especially was he sorry to run away without a word of farewell to the kindly eccentric old man, whose bread he had eaten for more than twelve months.

'I can write to Mr. Fife,' he pondered, 'and I don't think he will refuse me a decent character, which is an important consideration, even to the possessor of such bumps as mine. Poor old fellow, I wonder how he is faring in his sick-room! Heaven forbid that he should suffer for my lack of

taste and discernment; but it is just possible that he finds that niece of his a trifle more uncomfortable than usual—if not in the mood of Montaigne's peevish gamesters, whom the old Seigneur declares that he has seen worrying the cards with their teeth, and "swallowing whole bales of dice" in revenge for the loss of their money! The silly creature ought to feel grateful for the preservation of *her* money from jeopardy—but—all the same, as Montaigne says, the soul discharges her passions on false objects where the true are wanting, and I'm afraid poor dear old Fife isn't exactly lapped in lavender, and has reason, if he only knew it, to curse as heartily as I do this new, astounding, and most idiotic departure on the part of Miss Hilda.'

At this moment, the current of the

solitary lounger's thoughts was interrupted by distant shouting. Glad of any diversion or prospect of employment, he rose and walked towards the road, which ran through the 'policies,' and presently made out that he was being hailed by Alick, the boatman, one of the soulless hinds, of whom it was imputed to him that he was content to sink to the level.

CHAPTER X.

JOHN TURNS FERRYMAN.

'JOOONE, Jooone!' the red-headed Alick continued to bawl long after John Wood was within reasonable earshot. The boatman was a broad-shouldered, thick-set fellow, shock-headed and sharp-featured, a fair sample, however, of his race. If a very shower of beauty was really the earthly dower of the poet's Highland girl, depend upon it she was not a West-coast lassie. Beauty, feminine or masculine, is rare in that country, where the showers are but too

constantly outpoured, but not to the enhancement of the charms of the humbler natives. 'Eh, Joone! we're away to Conchray to put the doctor "wast" to the master—eh, but he is just baad! and we're not to come back without the doctor, whatever; and be as quick as we can too!—and the wind—there *iss* no wind, you're seeing that yourself; and Hamish said to me, "If Joone will tek an oar with us in the 'Hawk' it will be half again quicker that we will put the doctor 'wast.'"'

Distance, or rather direction, is always conveyed by 'wast' or 'east' in the native vocabulary.

Here Alick stopped and grinned engagingly. Sorry to hear of this aggravation of Mr. Fife's malady, and not loth to forget his troubles awhile in violent exertion,

Jack briefly nodded assent—and was soon tugging at a clumsy pair of oars behind Alick's broad back, the twain swinging in unison as they got a good 'way' on the bluff-bowed boat. Hamish—sottish, sleepy Hamish—lolled in the stern, with the tiller loosely grasped. The fellow could have steered a tolerably correct course to Conchray with his eyes shut—almost in his sleep. Southward they speed along the broad frith that severs Skye from Wester Ross, making for a point where no stranger could have guessed that any further passage could be open to them—a point marked by the white shaft of a lighthouse. Presently it can be seen that this lantern-topped tower stands sentinel over an alley as it were of water, a deep narrow channel, giving access to the superb land-locked

sheet of salt water known as Loch Alsh. The tide is with the rowers, and they fly past the white houses of Kyle-Akin village —past the little quay with horses waiting for the ferry-boat—past the rifted ruin standing forlorn on the knoll whence once it dominated the strait. No time had John to observe the dark cloud of smoke, which told of the steamer passing on its southward way through Kyle Rhea. His boat leaves that narrow passage (marking Skye's last and nearest approach to the mainland) to the steerer's right, and hurries on till at last its keel grates on the shingle, near the spot where the doctor's house nestles under the green hill of Conchray.

Often during the next ten days did the same boat's crew go and return between

Sconsay and Conchray, sometimes carrying the worthy doctor, who was usually wanted in five places at once, at other times bearing parcels of medicines for the sick man, whose sickness defied the most skilful treatment. The weather luckily continued moderate, and no one of the 'Hawk's' passages was eventful or greatly protracted. Sometimes the wind would serve, and the boat go plunging along, outstripping the waves, to which she sloped one of her sides till the wash-boards were swept by the green and frothing water. Then Jack would stretch himself at ease, and watch the red-brown sail bellying, or the clouds lifting from those quaintly grouped pyramids and buttressed masses, the hills of Skye, or look up the fine rippling stretch of Loch Carron where it cleaves the coast of Ross,

spanned now and then by a complete arch of rainbow.

The doctor marvelled much as to what manner of man this could be, who was hailed as an equal by Alick and Hamish, but yet, in his respectful inquiries as to Mr. Fife's state, betrayed the accents and address of a cultured gentleman. From the first he had little hope to give to those who were interested in this patient—the innocent if eccentric naturalist, whose eyes were never again to beam over feathered spoils, whose feet were to tread no more the short turf of the cliffs, whence he had loved to watch the haunts and habits of sea-fowl.

Soon came the day when the 'Hawk' received a sadder freight than she had borne before—a coffin on its way to the old kirk-

yard of Lochalsh. There was a little procession on this calm smiling morning of rough boats starting from the small haven of Sconsay. Unknown as he had been beyond the limits of his own isle, Mr. Fife's inoffensive life and real kindliness of heart had combined with his reputation as a born Scot and good pay-master to secure him the good-will of his humble neighbours, and many of these manned their rough vessels to follow the laird of Sconsay to his last resting-place. The upper classes were only represented by two or three factors of neighbouring proprietors, a brace of ministers, a Skye banker, and the writer, or solicitor, as he has begun to call himself, from Broadford. From Andiron Lane had come two brethren of the deceased, and an Auchmuty cousin—not the phrenologist, to

Jack's great relief, but a much younger and less peculiar man—and with these relatives there 'followed' the tall figure, cloaked and cowled, of the dead man's niece, and sole companion of his later years.

With stony immobility Miss Fife had received her kindred at the end of their long journey north. There was nothing lacking, indeed, in the island mansion that could be devised for the creature comfort of these wearied London-Scots—all honour and respect due to next-of-kin was shown—all that propriety demanded was done and provided. But if young Archibald Auchmuty had cherished any design of ingratiating himself with his cousin Hilda—improving thereby a mournful occasion—he must speedily have abandoned all present

hope. After the first frigidly decorous greeting she scarcely looked at her cousin, let him curl his fine chestnut whiskers never so insinuatingly with his stalwart hand. She could not be got to talk, let the conversation open never so befittingly with a touching emphasis in the manly tones. Well, well! there were young ladies in London town who seemed to find something worthy their notice in a North British gentleman of six feet in stature, who had his foot on the ladder up which many of his kindred had climbed to wealth—and though Miss Hilda's purse might be a long one (who should say how long till the will shall be read?) and herself a fine personable lady, she might (so thought her cousin) go farther and fare worse! The uncles were anxious to bear their niece south with

them after the funeral, offering her all manner of hospitality in comfortable suburban abodes; but Miss Fife, though she said she thanked Uncle James and Uncle Donald kindly, firmly declined their invitations. She and her maid would, after the funeral, return for a while to the desolate house of Sconsay, and perhaps, if she felt a change needful, or it became otherwise incumbent on her to quit, they would cross to Portree, and sojourn for a season in apartments in that town.

Cold and unlovely is a Scotch funeral, whether conducted after the rites of the Established or of the Free Kirk. In the house, whence the dead is to be carried, prayers are offered at the discretion of the ministers present; but at the grave-side it is not considered essential that a word

should be spoken in the way of farewell or commendation. Or if zeal move a present minister to 'offer prayer'—it is but a repetition of what has been already pronounced, interspersed with Scriptural tags and trite ejaculations, and cannot compare with the beautiful and soul-sustaining office of the English Church, the choice product of hallowed study and biblical research.

That funerals, such as they are, are highly appreciated, popular indeed, among the people of Scotland is not to be denied. But it is rather as a social event than as a religious ceremony that the Highlander regards the burying of his neighbour. In the sparsely populated western districts, anything that brings together an unusual gathering of distant cousins and clansmen,

'freens' and neighbours, is a thing to be made the most of. Neither is it in any way against the credit of a Highland funeral that much whiskey should be consumed—a fact which perhaps further accounts for the popularity of these gatherings.

Though the whiskey and the crowding were probably trials to the gentlemen from Andiron Lane, they bore themselves meekly (as befitted true nurslings of Caledonia) under all, rebelling neither against the subdued conviviality of the laymen nor the long-winded oratory of the clerics. They were doing their duty by poor Robert; and however glad they would be to tread London pavements again, they would make the best of the old mother-country and her quaint customs while sojourners in the North.

The evening after the funeral was, for the time of year, sultry, when, thoroughly tired out and longing to be gone from a scene which revolted his English prejudices, John West strolled along the rocky shore of Loch Alsh, where many boats were moored, or drawn up into little sandy coves, while their owners still lingered in the enjoyment of conversation not untempered with 'usquebaugh' dispensed among adjoining cottages of the crofters.

His own mates Alick and Hamish were among the greediest of drink and gossip, and had responded with anger and taunts to his hints that they would be wise to start for Sconsay before night fell. Was an island proprietor, a laird of a sea-girt realm of his own, buried every day, that such hurry should be used, such curtail-

ments of the last honours tolerated? Luckily the abuse which sottish Hamish poured forth against his ungenial fellow-servant was couched in the Gaelic, of which Jack had mastered a few phrases only. With a shrug of his shoulders he passed from the door-place of the low and frowsy hut, reeking of dirt, peat-smoke, and sun-dried fish, to the pure air of the deserted beach, and began to wonder where he would bestow himself if all the Sconsay folk were resolved to make a night of it on the mainland. The gentlemen from London had gone on to Balmacara to await the steamer which should convey them to the Clyde, and Miss Fife had retired to the manse, where hospitality had been offered to her.

'If it turns no colder than at present,'

Jack pondered as he stowed himself on an inviting heap of dry sea nets in the stern of a small boat, moored somewhat apart from the rest, 'I shall take no harm. Anyhow, better freeze than sleep in one of those dens.'

The poor fellow had had many a broken night of late, and having besides done more than his fair share that day in pulling an oar in the heavily-freighted 'Hawk,' was weary, and soon fell into a deep sleep, dreamless at first, but latterly disturbed by many fantasies. It seemed to him that over broken and difficult ground his mother's form moved ever in front of him —and by no effort could he come up with her, or prevail on her to wait for him. His heart was filled with all the anguish, which, as a child, he might have felt in so

strange a plight, and sobbing and straining he followed that beloved guide, who seemed so unrelenting in ever eluding him. At last he seemed, in spite of desperate struggles, to be sinking in some quagmire, but, as the cold slime lapped him round, a hand was stretched to rescue him, and Mary Holbrooke's sweet voice cried, 'Courage! for little Mary's sake, keep up! We will all be happy at home again at Swardham if only you will keep up.'

Then in a kind of ecstasy he turned up his sinking face and saw those two dear eyes shining like stars, shining lovingly down into his own. For a moment or so of rapture he gazed, but soon something like a black shadow fell in such wise as to intercept his vision—a black cowled shadow from which he shrank with horror as it

hovered close above him. With a violent start he awoke, uncertain where he was, and dazed by his disturbing dream. Cold and shivering he struggled to his knees, and to his surprise felt them wetted as in a pool of water. The boat must be leaking; and yet, if he remembered right, it ought to be left high and dry by the ebbing tide. But what was that sound? Surely the dull creaking of oars plied gently—the boat was moving! Peering through the chill vail of misty darkness, his eyes made out the slim figure of a mysterious sculler swinging to the oars—made out also that the boat was hurrying through a waste of water. Could it be a senseless trick on the part of one of those half-drunken people?

'Who are you?' he shouted, 'and where are you taking the boat almost half full of

water?' No answer. 'Oh confound it!' said Jack aloud, 'I dare say the fool has no English — but I can't stand this sort of thing.'

Advancing, he knelt on the thwart immediately facing the rower, in such fashion as to prevent further use of the sculls, when to his amazement the figure arose from its seat, and unshipping both oars at once from the thole-pins on which they worked, launched them with vigorous hands right and left into the sea where they vanished instantly into the environing gloom. Angered by this additional folly, Jack seized the wrists, and in doing so became aware that it was a woman whom he grasped.

'Are you mad?' he shouted in bewilderment, 'or how are we to make the shore

again, even if you know where we are, or this leak can be stopped in time?'

As he spoke he shook the woman's arms impatiently, but dropped them, and recoiled aghast as the voice of Hilda Fife, wild and mocking but unmistakable, returned him answer:

'Whether I am mad or no matters little. I am sane enough to have got *you* here, where we shall cry quits. And I know where we are—many miles from the spot where you last trod the ground! Ah! you don't believe it! but even you know that the tide runs out through Kyle Rhea like a mill-race, and that's where I've taken you for my revenge. There is a thick sea-mist, and I can only guess, but we should be a good many miles now from land, perhaps somewhere off the point of

Sleat! And as to the leak, it would be odd if it could be stopped in time, as you say, for I have pulled the cork out and thrown it away. You would not live with me—you could not be bribed to do it, dog's life as you have to live without me. Well? you have got to die with me!'

She stopped and laughed, a weird, blood-curdling mockery of laughter. Before it died away, Jack had sprung to his feet, and groping in the darkness, prized up the bottom boards which fitted, floor-wise, over the hollow keel of the boat. It was as this crazy murderous wretch had said. Right amidships, his hand, feeling along the boat's ribs in a cold pool which reached his elbow, came upon a hole through which the water was entering fast—a hole the purpose of which was to drain the keel of bilge

when securely held up to a yacht's davits, or pulled high upon a beach.

Tearing off his boots and thick woollen socks, he strove to plug with the latter the place whence the cork had been stolen—and when he found the influx abating, began to bale out the water with a boot. Fortunately for his chances of frustrating his companion's design, the night was calm. Otherwise this oarless and rudderless boat must soon have been overwhelmed by waves, which would have had it (slight thing that it was at best) at their mercy. His heart was beating painfully, and he felt himself sore indeed beset, but he would not answer this destestable woman, whose unwelcome love had soured, as it seemed, into such virulent hate that she counted it cheap to die by drowning, while she could

see the man who had refused her hand engulfed at her side. He busied himself in his efforts to keep the boat afloat—even paddling, he knew not whither, with one of the bottom boards. If they were really far from land, some ship might pick them up, and save this wretched creature from a double crime. She was speaking again—but he strove so to occupy himself that her words should not reach his ear. Then she rose, and stepping towards him, where he crouched twirling his board (fish-tail fashion) over the stern, seated herself on the nearest thwart.

'Ah,' she hissed, as she thrust her face closer to his, 'you are proud—proud to the last; a proud menial—ha! ha! but listen—it is you strong swimmers that have the greatest agony in drowning. *I* know what

it is to *beat* the water and *beat* the water when you are tired out and can do no more. You saved me that bout; but *this* time I am wiser. Look! I have wrapped this thick cloak round me—like a pall, isn't it?—and I shall go down, down quietly, without a struggle, when this boat founders from under us—as it must, for all your vain labour. Ah, you are strong; but strength is no good *here*,—all the worse for you! Better give up, better let me fold you in this pall of mine, and go down with me quietly; but that I know you will not do! I know you hate me—you are shrinking away from me now—and I know that there is some woman you love; not that false woman, the duke's daughter they told me of, but some one else. Ah, you will never see her again, even if she is faithful to one

fallen so low—a hireling, a fellow-servant of drunkards and boors. No one's love but mine could stand that test,—and mine you rejected, and have to pay for your folly; for I hate you now, and I have trapped you to your death, strong man as you are. Yes, you will never see daylight again, and you will never see *her*. Mary, is it?—you muttered "Mary" in your sleep. Ah, ha! Mary, Mary, where is your lover?'

With fierce joy she felt that he winced and recoiled from her last assault, and was heaping further taunts when he broke out violently:

'Silence—wretch—madwoman! I will hear no more of this.' Then, as if ashamed to have been betrayed into this outbreak, he added—'God have mercy on you, and forgive you! I believe you are not an

accountable being, and bear you no malice. If I must die, let me die at peace with all.'

The miserable woman hearing his softened voice, fell into a sudden paroxysm of sobbing, which she seemed to use all pains to suppress, but which deprived her of speech. Just at this time the first faint tinge of morning light made its way through the cold thick sea-fog which brooded on the vast, still ocean.

All through this horrible night the fog had lent its aid to the darkness that overarched the helpless boat; and now it screened this miserable pair from all observation, allowing the broadening day to filter dimly, as through some tabernacle's sheets, to Jack's straining eyes. Oh, if it would but lift and give to his view some hill, some

rock, however distant! How welcome would the barrenest crag of Skye loom through the mist! How maddening to think that some coaster or fishing-boat might be close at hand, becalmed in the windless dawn, and yet hopelessly muffled in the fatal haze! A poor thing truly was the life he was like to lead, a broken-down existence, loveless as landless; but Jack's thoughts were not all of this life that now is. He felt unfit to die; he longed for time to prepare himself for his great change; time wherein to strive by repentance and faith to be less unfit to meet his mother in heaven. Listening intently, while his lips strove to mutter a prayer, he thought he heard a sound as of the gentle plash of the tide upon a shore. They might have drifted into some bay or loch! There might be

some crofter's house within ear-shot! He stood up and shouted hoarsely—

'Help, ho!—help here!'

These cries, little likely as they were to bring the aid desired, seemed to goad the desperate woman. She sprang from her crouching posture and tore Jack's woollen plug from the hole. Not content with this, she snatched from its receptacle one of the long iron thole-pins, and with furious violence and marvellous dexterity forced it between the slight timbers of the boat, till one of them started and ripped, half-rotten as it was. The water spouted through this new wound and sprinkled Hilda Fife's face as she knelt at her work, prizing the faulty plank further away with a shrill yell of exultation. Instinctively Jack grappled with her to wrest the iron pin from her

hands, when, dropping her weapon, she flung both her sinewy arms around him, and muffling him in the folds of her cloak, shrieked out—

'Together — together we'll sink to the bottom of the sea! You shall be mine in death, since you would not be mine in life.'

As he struggled in her hateful embrace, sounds seemed anew to surge in his ears, half-swathed as they were in the cloak. Could it be fancy, or *did* he hear the panting of a steamer's engines close upon them? He raised a stifled cry, and disengaged his head just in time to see the sharp prow of a vessel shoot forth from the wall of mist, and in an instant bear down right upon the boat, now low in the water and rapidly foundering. Before he could utter a second

shout the bows of the steamer, whose lights blazed on high, had crashed into them cutting the crazy boat clean in two and, as it seemed, striking Miss Fife, for she relaxed her grasp and fell dumbly, sucked beneath the rushing keel, which barely cleared John West. The surging of the water round his head as he instinctively struggled for dear life, an agonized look up at the hull as it rushed past, a dim perception of a shouting on board—and then, as he gasped among the wash astern, a splash close to his head, the splash of a life-buoy flung from the vessel, which he grasped with numb hands. Such were the experiences of the next moments. Clutching the white circle to his breast, he felt himself pulled rapidly through the waters, while the vessel, with the way on her though the engines were stopped, still

forged ahead. Then a boat, hastily launched, approached him, and he was dragged up into it by two eager, peering men, between whose hands he swooned while endeavouring to urge them to save his unhappy fellow-passenger.

CHAPTER XI.

ADOLPHUS IN WANT OF A MISSION.

THE new Parliament was installed, and all men were full of the great Conservative reaction that had changed the balance of power, and frustrated the hopes in which, presumably, the mighty Premier had dissolved the previous House. Many were the new men who now first took their seats in the chamber of representatives; but among the list of victors the name of Adolphus West was not to be found. To this ill-treated young man only remained rage, mortification,

a fair share of ridicule, two or three suits of clothes ruined by pelted mud and other more unfragrant substances, and last, but not least, a long bill—as results and souvenirs of his candidature. He had been horribly abused and practised on—so he felt and avowed—not so much by his old associates, on whose demonstrations he had so counted that the reality could scarce exceed in badness his expectations. However, what with the police and a hired body-guard of stalwart fellows (facetiously dubbed Longboro' lambs), he had not fared so much worse than the average of Conservative candidates in a very radical borough. There had been one rather awkward scuffle, to be sure, when he had quaked for his very life, before a charge of most determined ruffians, making for him with war-cries of—'To the

black-ditch with the turncoat!' 'Duck him! drown the rat!' and such like ribaldry. And really they would have had him to a certainty, perhaps also drowned him, but for the rather humiliating intervention of a female, whom that stupid Clark made a fuss over and compared to the Maid of Saragossa; but who was only Sally Soole, armed with the key of her father's back warehouse, through which she hurried her quondam friend to an entrance in another street, while the rabble knocked at a locked door. Curious excitable creature Sally! wouldn't shake hands, though she was quivering all over with emotion.

But it was not the brutality of a mob on which Adolphus West brooded with a sense of injury. He felt himself to have been abominably treated by the whole Con-

servative party, and especially by the wire-pullers thereof. For, for a while, a measure of support and countenance, limited indeed, but still a measure, had been vouchsafed to the squire of Swardham as candidate for a seat for Longshire. Though, as might have been expected, Adolphus himself thought any support accorded the most natural thing in the world, and far less than his deserts, Mr. Clark had been evidently surprised and exultant, putting extra vigour into his efforts, and taking more sanguine views of his patron's chances from the moment when the oracles of the Carlton uttered a guarded approval of West's campaign. But when the election was already nigh at hand, Mr. Clark's flow of spirit was suddenly checked. Lord Herriard, the Duke of Hexham's heir, unexpectedly and

suddenly consented to contest the county in the Conservative interest, and the unseen wire-pullers straightway ignored Adolphus and adopted Herriard. The former could not at first see that the entry of a lord into the lists had wrought any formidable change in the prospects that had smiled; and snubbed poor Mr. Clark royally when he seemed to doubt the proud assertion that, after all, an independent candidate, promising a general but indiscriminating support to a Conservative ministry, would be the likeliest to succeed in Longshire. Even when it became evident that the good Tories, who had promised votes to the sole wearer of their colours, let him be personally never so distasteful, were immensely relieved to transfer all their support to a better man,

Adolphus insisted on going to the poll. To this pitch of heroism or obstinacy he was impelled not less by growing belief in his own value to the Tory cause than by the urgency of the Lady Georgiana. She had hit on the electioneering campaign as a happy device for occupying her admirer's redundant spare time; and, this having had the desired effect, it mattered little whether the struggle should be fought to the bitter end or abandoned a few days earlier.

That Adolphus would be chosen a knight of her native shire never occurred as possible to Lady G., who, however, was surprised and possibly a little amused at the wretched position which, after many hopeful prophecies, he finally occupied at the bottom of the poll—distanced by hundreds by the Liberal candidate, an old and tried

representative, who in his turn was far below Herriard.

'The duke can't possibly live many months,' so augured the dark-eyed Circe; 'and then that stick Herriard will go up to the other house, and you'll come in triumphantly.'

But Adolphus was too bitter of spirit to be cheered by any such prospect, or even by abuse of his supplanter, and so snarled and snapped at those with whom he came in contact, that great was the joy at Beausite, and greater at Swardham, when, in the course of events, a valid reason was presented for his taking himself off for a season from the scene of his defeat.

It was late in the summer succeeding the election that a letter came from Mr. Peter Clark which, though written from

a bed of sickness, was written in a strain of pardonable elation. Peter had at last struck the trail of Aylmer FitzRaymond, and though himself disabled by an aguish fever, Peter could put any one in the way of running that slippery customer to earth within a week or so from date. The news caused the heart of Adolphus West to throb with excitement. Far rather would he have been certified of the wanderer's death; but failing such good fortune, he would, at any rate, soon be out of this horrid, this wearing suspense. In person he would seek out the man, and surely it would not be difficult to induce him to surrender his legal rights over the wife whom he had deserted. It appeared from the agent's letter that Aylmer had till recently been an officer in the Turkish service, but had resigned his com-

mission in consequence of a gambling scandal. A young Russian of princely rank had, as it seemed, fallen among thieves while on his travels in the region of the Lower Danube, and his government had taken up the case. Thus it fell out that Aylmer's share in fleecing the reckless lad involved him in exposure and disgrace, such as had, to tell the truth, been his lot previously in divers other and more westerly countries of Europe. He had, however, on this occasion, the resource afforded by the presence of a sympathetic friend, not indeed an acquaintance of long standing, but one (as it was hinted) who had himself narrowly escaped Russian interference in the interest of the plundered prince, and who now offered to 'Colonel' FitzRaymond a passage on his yacht to regions that might prove less

hot, less dangerous. Fortified by, who shall say what, 'piles' of undisgorged plunder, FitzRaymond had sailed from Varna the day before Peter Clark, in hot pursuit, re-entered the town. The obliging owner of the vessel, which was named the Thyra, was of Scandinavian nationality, though by habits thoroughly cosmopolitan, and Peter had good reason to believe that his destination was a northern port, probably Christiansand or Copenhagen, though it was supposed that the yacht would make a detour and put into the Mersey, for the sake of exchanging her crew of Levantines for Danish or Norwegian sailors in the port of Liverpool. In the Mersey then it might be possible to intercept FitzRaymond, or failing that, it would not be difficult to trace the further progress of the Thyra,

whose owner was known as Count Bjornsen, and possessed a house or property in Norway, of which he was accustomed to make frequent mention. The acute Peter was clearly of opinion that the count and his guest were for the present anxious to shun rather than to court the observation of the public, and where could a safer seclusion offer than in a Norwegian chateau? The rest of the letter contained practical suggestions as to the best means of ensuring speedy information of the arrival of the Thyra in any port, British or foreign, and in conclusion an expression of the writer's satisfaction at having earned his wages and expenses.

Within an hour of the receipt of this intelligence, Adolphus West was ushered into the untidy room where Lady Georgiana

sat all alone. Shabby as the house had been when first he entered it, things were rapidly becoming worse, as will happen where antique furniture is suddenly called to bear the brunt of an ill-regulated *ménage*, given to bear-fighting, and the keeping of many uncontrolled animals. A blind-cord had snapped, and, lest inconvenient darkness should result, the blind was simply twisted round and round itself, till it assumed an hour-glass outline, and obscured only a few of the dingy panes. In front of a sofa from which the stuffing protruded in many places (rent by the earl's fox-terrier pups), there was a huge litter of cartridges and cartridge-cases, and the flooring of polished oak was ruthlessly stamped with little circles, impressed in this useful manufacture. On the single disordered table lay

a pile of articles—pipes, parasols, whips, battledores, withered button-holes, and literature, represented by Bailey and Bradshaw and some crumpled newspapers. These had been pushed together to allow a cloth to be spread over one end of the table, on which, though it was afternoon, were still to be seen the remains of breakfast for two—a congealed morsel of omelette, an emptied pint of St. Julien, an egg-shell, and a tiny tea-pot. Hard by, on the floor, were two saucers overturned amid a milky patch on the ancient carpet, where the dogs had quarrelled over their share of the repast.

But amid all the disarray of her room not a speck or soil clung to Lady Georgiana. Nothing could be more becoming, more admirable in its fit, than her

plain dark gown. Her hands lay idle on her lap as she sat in a great arm-chair, with a yellow French novel tumbled at her feet —beautiful white hands, exquisitely tapering fingers! beholding them, this slight shambling fellow with his pale face and pale red hair, glowed with longing to press them in his own, and cover them with kisses, while he claimed this radiant graceful woman, with her dark maze of short clustering curls, her laughing eyes, her ripe red lips, for his very own. Hungrily looking at her, and knowing that he dared not, now or, under existing circumstances, ever indulge his unseasonable longings, he hated himself for being so abjectly enslaved, but knew that there was no struggling with this master-passion.

Unable to answer her careless greeting,

he put the letter into her hand, and sat down opposite to her, intently watching her while she read it. Would she be sorry to learn that her worthless husband was alive? or, horrid thought, was there any surviving spark of tenderness for the wretch? But Lady G. was not one to indulge a spectator with any clue to what passed in her bosom. One shapely hand was pressed over her lips as she read, concealing them and her dimpled chin, but her brows were not knit, her colour neither faded nor deepened, and her manner was unaltered when at last she folded Peter Clark's letter neatly, and looking straight into her adorer's white-lashed eyes, simply said—

'Well?'

He chafed under her undemonstrative

way, but dared not provoke her by giving passage to words that trembled on his tongue.

'Well,' he faltered, 'I am only waiting for your sanction to start in pursuit of your —of this man. I have every confidence that after he has heard what I shall have to say to him, he won't put any obstacle in your way. You will divorce him, doing yourself the barest justice by so ridding yourself. It will only be necessary to prove a tithe of the facts of which I hope soon to be in possession, and no judge can refuse you such bare justice—and then! and then!'

Excited beyond measure as he approached this climax, he flung himself on his knees by her side, and snatched at one of her hands, seeking to carry it to his lips.

Lady G.'s own beautiful lips parted, but not to smile. Breathing short, she lifted her hand out of his reach, and holding it aloft looked liker to some sibyl charged with boding words than to her wonted self.

'Sale and barter!' she cried, scornfully; 'if you are eager to buy, you credit *him* with equal anxiety to dispose of this valuable hand of mine. But, beware! I have heard of such a word as collusion—not to say bribery and corruption—and any whisper of such dealing would vitiate all arguments for your scheme.'

'Good God,' he gasped, 'you speak as if you had no concern at all, no interest either way in the scheme as you call it. Oh, Georgiana, I have waited and worked! you are not going to throw me over after all?'

'Nonsense,' she replied, less mockingly however; 'I come of a legal stock, remember, and if I point out flaws, does it show no concern in the proceedings? But you must own that the liberty which you desire for me is, according to your plan, to be surrendered almost as soon as secured.'

'You shall have all possible liberty—you shall do what you will with me and mine, if you consent to make me happy.'

'Ah, yes,' she said, laughing now, 'you are all the same—most devoted creatures! It shocks you to hear me conjugate the verb, "I am selfish, thou art selfish, he, she, or it is selfish, we are selfish," and so on; but it hits off everybody I have ever known to a T.'

'You sha'n't find me selfish, I swear it! I know you have not been treated as you

deserve; but that shall be ended if I succeed. Give me some comfort, then, to take away with me.'

His voice grew very pitiful, and his pale blue eyes were moist. With a twitch of the corners of her lips, Lady G., now quite herself again, let her hand fall for a second lightly on his pale red hair, and then she rattled away—

'Take my blessing, then, and much good may it do you. It's unlucky that Fairy is just off to the Cheltenham Autumn Meeting —because you can't expect me to promise and vow myself away solemnly in the absence of my sole relative and protector. He might have given you some advice too about your journey—Fairy is a first-rate hand at spotting the right things for *other* people. However, if you are in the same

mind when I am set free, as I suppose I possibly shall be, and we are both alive and so on, why, as the slavey remarked, I don't know but what I might. Get up now, there's a good fellow, I'm going to ring the bell. Oh, thanks! I'm really peckish, and if anybody condescends to answer the bell, we'll have up some lunch—there's a ham, I know. What! can't eat anything? That will never do, you know.'

Poor wretch! he would have given all he was worth to catch her in his arms, as she stood up and leaned her elbow on the mantelpiece, to strain her to him and kiss her mouth but once. But a pressure of a cool small hand was all that was accorded to him. It, at any rate, he did kiss feverishly, and left the room full of unsatisfied craving—wretched, and yet not daring to

shape a grievance. As he went down the great echoing stairway, with its dome overhead, from which the painted splendours peeled, she leaned over the balustrade and gave him a last vision.

'You'll write of course,' she cried, as he stopped and looked up,—'write to Fairy if it's anything like business. Ta-ta! take care of yourself—and here's luck!'

She pulled off her slipper—wonderful little slipper with a coquettish scarlet bow—and flung it after him. Her laughing voice rang in his ears as he crossed to the door. He left Beausite more madly than ever enamoured of this daughter of the house. When alone in his own home he kissed and mumbled the slipper which was worn by her dainty foot. He would have liked to

set that little foot upon his neck, grovelling on the ground before this woman, who, though she gave him little encouragement, nothing of the warmth he coveted, held him as by a spell. Of her only he thought during his interview with Mr. Clark, and his preparations for the journey. There was his old mother in her villa at Longboro', ready enough to let by-gones be by-gones, sure to be stricken with misery when she should hear of his sudden departure. But Adolphus West could not spare an hour for the old mother, who had been, as far as she knew how, a good mother to him. He could not think of Swardham, the great prize which had fallen to his lot. He would never care to see the place again, unless he might inhabit it with Georgiana as its mistress. Fretfully he scouted the date

of Clark's accompanying him on his quest.

'Stuff! what should I want with you at my elbow? your business is to see that five thousand pounds is lodged to my credit in Naylor's Bank at Liverpool, and for the rest—do what I may instruct by letter or telegram.'

It was useless for Clark to urge that, under the most favourable conditions of steaming, the Thyra could hardly have reached Liverpool. Obvious as it was that the mail conveying Peter's letter must have outstripped a yacht of a hundred and twenty tons, even if the latter put into no port between the Black Sea and the Mersey, West was impatient of the least delay, and started for Liverpool within twenty-four hours of receipt of the letter. Here he had

ample time not only to engage competent persons to report the yacht's arrival as soon as it was notified to the authorities of the port, but to indulge in a surfeit of his idolatry while eating his heart out in enforced inaction. Under the new impulse given to his hopes, he forgot his late wrath and disappointment in the matter of the election; he forgot the past with its many mortifications and its one signal aggrandisement; he thought only of his dark-eyed charmer, and of the future to be spent with her. Of his chances of sympathy or real union in that future he made no account—it is questionable if even his self-conceit could have invested those chances with hopeful hues—he only dreamed of the one prospect, he would possess that being, the loveliest he had ever beheld—the loveliest (he thought)

on earth! Her very inaccessibility to tenderness lent a greater value to that joy. She had kept him at a distance; she was but reserving herself; she was to be his. After a long fortnight of feverish waiting, of constant tension and rack, relieved only by these visions, the news was brought to him one morning in his bed at the hotel, that the Thyra had come in late on the previous night, and was lying off Nicholson's landing-stage. West stormed at the messenger.

'Why had he not been roused at the moment of the yacht's approach? Why had they let him lie till nine o'clock?'

Pale and nervous, and untidy from haste, he was presently driven to the landing-stage, and rowed out to the yacht, a craft painted all in dingy white with a white

funnel. Twice did his boatmen row round the Thyra, hailing her in stentorian tones. 'Seems as if there wasn't nobody aboard,' one of the men were saying, when, from the companion, a gentleman, in the correct garb of dark jacket with gilt buttons and round cap to match, leisurely emerged and leaned over the taff-rail. West's heart throbbed violently, and then sank within him. From the earl's description of his cousin he knew him to be a tall fair-haired man, and this man was short and black-haired, with a jetty moustache. Courteously touching his cap, the unknown inquired, in excellent English just tinged with a foreign accent—

'What is your business, sir? what can I do for you?'

'Sir, you can do me the favour of inform-

ing me if Colonel FitzRaymond, Aylmer FitzRaymond, is on board this vessel.'

'Ah,' replied the glib foreigner, raising his black eyebrows, 'and you have business with FitzRaymond? A thousand regrets that I have not brought him here, delighted as he would doubtless be to encounter your kind welcome. But, alas! alas! no further than Malta had I the distinguished pleasure of my friend FitzRaymond's company on this my poor little boat. For at Malta the colonel met with some compatriots, some ancient companions of arms, who go to travel in Turkestan, at whose persuasion the colonel (speaking perfectly many languages of the East) joined himself of the party, and deprived me of the pleasure of his distinguished society. By this time he is assuredly approaching the confines of

Turkestan, and I—I only have the pleasure of giving his friend of his news instead of——'

Here the Count Bjornsen (for such was the style of the owner of the yacht) once more lifted his cap gravely, and with a gentle 'If you have, then, no further commands for me' was retiring, when Adolphus, choking with disappointment, exclaimed—

'You know, perhaps, where to write to him--if you could tell me—'

'Ah!' said the count, turning round at the top of the companion—'it is true that the postal arrangements of Turkestan are incomplete — yes, decidedly rudimentary! But, in awaiting the return of our distinguished friend, I would suggest that Poste Restante Constantinople will be an address of the safest,' and with these words of

wisdom and a grave inclination of the head, the count disappeared, leaving West almost delirious with vexation and wild desires to slay Peter Clark.

So crushed and baffled was this luckless man at first, that he lay for hours helpless on his bed at the hotel, and it was not till evening that he felt impelled once more to visit the landing-stage, with some vague hope of eliciting further information. Here he was again disappointed. Missing the Thyra from her berth he made inquiries, and found that she had got up steam and dropped down the river about an hour before. This swift departure gave him an uneasy feeling that he had somehow been beguiled by this smooth-tongued count. Why had he been so easily daunted? Could he not at least have insisted on boarding the yacht for

further conversation? He almost wished he had brought Clark with him after all. As he was dejectedly taking himself to task, he felt a touch on his arm. One of the harbour officials, whom he had feed for information, saluted and said—

'Ask pardon, sir, but here's a man as has come off of that yacht, one as shipped aboard her in the Black Sea—perhaps you'd speak to him.'

A brown-faced man in a red cowl stepped forward on this introduction and bowed low, as West surveyed him anxiously.

'If you can tell me anything about the fair gentleman, the Englishman who left you at Malta, I can make it worth your while,' he said.

The man, a Maltese steward, smiled till his little beady eyes were enveloped in

myriad wrinkles, and answered quickly in very queer-sounding English—

'You mean Colonel FitzRaimon? I tell you where he is; you are a gentleman and I tell you. Colonel is just where he was this morning; he is on board de yacht of de count.'

West roared out an oath, while sweat broke out on his pale forehead. 'That count! that cursed glib liar!' The man went on:

'You are perhaps friend of de Colonel, yes?'

'The scoundrel!' West broke out at last, 'at least I mean, I don't know him, I mean him no harm.'

'Ah!' the Maltese uttered a prolonged sound, 'if he is *not* the friend of m'sieur, I will say *sans façon* he is escroc; he

afraid to be put in prison, that is why he hide.'

Oh, outrageous fool that he had been! Had his errand been plainly stated, had he opened negotiations with the yacht more astutely, this miserable failure and delay, this loss of an invaluable trail, would have been avoided! He gnashed his teeth and swore frightfully enough to have appalled any but sea-faring men. But the Maltese touched his red night-cap and respectfully began—

'I know where the count goes at present —the count's valet was my friend, and he tell me.'

Ah, here was a chance of retrieving! a chance worth fifty-thousand times the bribe that would content this man, who might surely be believed. In a few broken words he assured the Maltese that he would pay

well for information, well—more than well! The beady eyes twinkled with joy, and, rapidly gabbling in his imperfect English, their owner set forth that Bergen in Norway was the port whither the Thyra was bound, and that on a fiord somewhere between that place and the Sogne Fiord the count possessed a house, where he proposed to sojourn, with the colonel as guest.

West's first idea was to charter a steamer and go in instant pursuit of the yacht. But even his heated brain could presently see the absurdity of such a course—the Thyra was no pirate to be challenged and boarded by a superior force on the high seas. Conciliation and diplomacy must be his weapons, when at last he should overtake these shifty suspicious fugitives. High-

handed proceedings could only lead to defeat. Dismissing the Maltese, well-contented, he made some hurried inquiries at a neighbouring packet-office, and soon convinced himself that his best way would be to cross England by rail, and take steamer from Hull to Bergen, where he might hope to arrive quite as soon as the yacht, which must go far north, and might perhaps be delayed in navigating the stormy waters from which the Hebrides arise, or those which toss between Duncansby Head and the mainland of Orkney.

On this advice Adolphus West acted immediately, quitting Liverpool within an hour of his interview with the Maltese sailor.

CHAPTER XII.

ON BOARD THE THYRA.

IT was long before John Wood (to continue to call him what he called himself) regained complete consciousness and the full use of his senses. There were intervals in which he was conscious of being fed and subjected to other attentions, for which he felt no gratitude; but stupor quickly took possession again of his mind; and his exhausted body, bruised and battered by the collision, which had smashed the small boat like a nutshell and stunned its other occupant, craved a long spell of perfect repose

On the third day, however, after he had been picked up, he began to 'take notice,' and essayed to speak to a man who acted as his nurse from time to time.

He remembered now all that had happened: the funeral of Robert Fife, his slumbers on the shore of Loch Alsh, the strange awaking in the boat, the horrid watches of the night shared with that unhappy maniac who had gone to her doom, the final catastrophe, and the manner of his rescue. Though still languid and nerveless, he had a faint wish to know whither he was being borne in the vessel whose narrow cabin was his sick-room. But his sailor-nurse during his short visits was taciturn, and plainly understood very little English, and Jack was not up to any effort. He felt that he owed a debt of gratitude

to the crew of this vessel, who were probably doing their best for him (though indeed the accommodation was anything but luxurious for a man with bruised and aching ribs), and he hoped soon to see the captain, or some one in authority, to whom he might express his thankfulness.

Meanwhile he did not trouble himself about the future. It would certainly be stern and hard enough when he should be deposited on some strange shore, penniless and indebted for his very clothing to the charity of these foreign sailors! He developed a great capacity for sleep, which the gentle motion of the vessel seemed to assist, and lost all count of time. As his extreme exhaustion passed from him, these slumbers became lighter and admitted of dreams in which he renewed his old life as squire of

Swardham, and enjoyed once more his exhilarating gallops in the Longshire pastures. One forenoon he fancied himself mounted on his favourite hunter, and waiting for the fox to break at a well-known covert-side, when he was scandalized by some men who *would* play cards! He was just expressing his disgust at this novelty in forcible language, when 'I mark the king and win,' saluted his ear with such clearness that he woke up, and became aware that the door of his little cabin had swung open, and that not far from the other side of it a game of *écarté* had really been going on —moreover, that the losing player was expending fluent curses upon his luck in tones unmistakably British, and demanding an alteration of the game to piquet!

Much interested in the presence of a

countryman, Jack leaned his head feebly over the edge of his berth and launched his gaze into a small dingy saloon, where two men where shuffling cards at the table. The man who demanded piquet sat facing the cabin-door, and Jack studied him curiously, feeling sure that he was a man with a history. Undeniably an aristocratic-looking personage—not old, but considerably the worse for wear: his fair hair, of which he grew a long beard, had deserted the top of his head and was unkempt; his well-shaped nose had a pinched look, and was rather red at the tip; his eyes were moist and blood-shot; his large white hand was decidedly unsteady. 'A man who has lived, who lives hard;' thought Jack—'I scarcely think he is the skipper either. The other man sat with his back to the

cabin-door. He was much smaller than his companion, and his sleek, close-cropped head was black. His voice was well-modulated and pleasant, and he spoke English fluently, though not without a foreign accent. They played piquet—but with so little change of luck that the Englishman growled and swore incessantly as in turn he suffered pique and repique.

'I must have some liquor to take away the taste of this luck,' he said as he handed over the stakes.

'My dear fellow,' rejoined the other pleasantly, 'I decidedly advise you to wait till we lunch, when you shall have a bottle of the Perrier-Jouet.

But this proposition was scouted, and the Englishman with vehemence persisted in his demand for instant brandy, growing

more and more rude as the other sought to dissuade him, always courteously. At last, with a shrug of his shoulders, the shorter man rose, took a key from his watch-chain, and opening a locker produced a bottle of Cognac. Disregarding the clutching fingers oustretched for the spirit, he leisurely filled a gilded liqueur glass of fairy proportions, at sight of which fresh execrations burst from his friend.

'And you haven't even filled that wretched thimble to the brim,' he ended with many furious maledictions.

'My good sir, the glass is as full as is reasonable at sea, even in fine weather and in a steady hand.'

There was a sneer in these last words, and indeed the man who grasped the glass had to stoop over it with protruded lips

and eager haste to prevent the spilling of the liquor. As he gulped it down his friend watched him, and said in cool contemptuous tones:

'You may as well understand, once and for all, that I am not going to have a fellow in delirium tremens on my hands, either here or in my house. So; if you can't stomach my limiting you, you can take yourself off, you know, the moment we land.'

The Englishman, mollified perhaps by his dram, only muttered:

'Oh, all right, don't make a row'—and turning away took up a little book which lay on the table.

There was a moment's silence, broken by an exclamation from the last speaker:

'Why! where the deuce did you get this?'

'Oh! is it the fact of finding a book of your English Church services on my table that excites you? Droll, I grant. But it is not part of my marine library—that little breviary was in the waistcoat-pocket of the poor wretch we picked up the other day off the Point of Sleat—and they have had it in the engine-room to dry.'

With another ejaculation the fair tall Englishman rose and flung into the little cabin where Jack lay, who, dreading a possible scene in his weak state, had the presence of mind to quickly close his eyes. For he had recognized that little black book, despite its sodden state, and he well remembered its presence in his pocket. It was a little Common Prayer-book, which he had used for many years, and had taken on the morning of leaving Sconsay for the

funeral, that he might comfort himself after the Scottish function by reading over the beautiful office of his own Church for the burial of the dead. And on the fly-leaf, as now flashed upon him, were the words written, 'John West, Swardham.' He had gummed that leaf to the cover when he resolved to drop the old name and disappear from the old surroundings—not liking to tear it out because a text in his mother's handwriting was on its other side—but the bath in salt water had, no doubt, unglued the page. Who could this be to whom those few words caused manifest excitement? The man scanned him closely as he lay still and apparently sleeping—and presently, after a low whistle, muttered:

'By George it is! There's something to be made of this, or I'm drunker than drunk—

here, Eric, come in here if you can squeeze yourself beside me—oh, you won't wake him, he has never been conscious yet. What should you say if I told you that this fellow, that your sailors picked up, with nothing worth twopence upon him, is an English squire of old family and as fine a property as there is in the Midlands.'

With scarcely a pause—and in bantering tones much unlike the flurried speech of his friend, Eric answered:

'What should I say? I should say characteristic — infernally, no! *admirably* characteristic! Have I not heard of your great Scotch earl, who was washed overboard while voyaging as a common sailor before the mast? Do I not remember your respectable priest, who, after all the country

was convulsed about his disappearance, turned up in the guise of a cattle-drover? What can I say then but *most* characteristic?'

Before the end of this tirade the two men had retired from the cabin back into the wider space of the saloon, where they resumed their talk.

'When you've quite done talking rot about people you don't understand, I'll tell you *who* this is—unless you prefer my keeping my discovery to myself.'

'Ah, the good-hearted friend!—he could make so much out of his discovery without me!—he would be so thoroughly "en pays de connoissance" at Bergen with his invalided friend!—it is quite touching to witness his confidence.'

'You've a riling tongue, Eric, but you have stood my friend both at Varna and

Liverpool, and you shall stand in with me now. I tell you this ought to be a better thing than young Sergiovitch—this man has twenty thousand a year if he has a penny.'

'And we have *him*, you should add. H'm! this is flotsam and jetsam indeed! where and when had you the privilege of acquainting yourself with this eccentric's circumstances?'

'Considering that he belongs to my own county! — you needn't grin in that confounded sneering way—I *am* of a leading family, a titled family, broke as I may be, and when *I* speak of my own county, any English gentleman knows that Aylmer FitzRaymond is speaking of Longshire.'

'Oh, I know all about your nobility, my

friend!—dates from the last century!—*noblesse de la robe*, highly respectable, no doubt! I have even *heard* of the lord, the present head of the distinguished house of Fitz-Raymond. But I am to understand, then, that in Longshire you find room also for this gentleman whose estates produce the rental so appetising which you quote?'

'Good heavens, yes!—he is West of Swardham. Everybody has heard of the Wests. I wonder how many foreign counts one might lump together without making as big a man!'

'Admirably put indeed, my friend. You convey to a nicety the sense of something prodigious; but indeed the needy foreigner has long appreciated this English abundance, even from the rude ages when Bjorn my

forefather crossed this brine in his long ship to harry your fat fields.'

At this point one of the sailors hailed the speaker from the companion, and he hurried on deck, followed more slowly by his friend, who was indeed no other than Aylmer Fitz-Raymond. His own mention of the name as belonging to him had relieved the innocent eavesdropper in the cabin from infinite puzzling. Never otherwise would John West have recognized in this bearded, haggard, tremulous man the handsome and dashing soldier who had played havoc with female hearts in Longshire ten or twelve years back, and whose elopement with his beautiful cousin had caused a genuine sensation in the Midlands.

The young heir of Swardham had never been intimate with the junior branches

of the house of FitzRaymond — Rachel West had used her influence to bar any such intimacy, dreading the potency of Lady Georgiana's charms as much as she disapproved of her conduct; but he had of course often met Lord Fairford and his cousin, and had heard vague rumours of the life of the latter, after he had fled his native country a proclaimed outlaw.

'If birds of a feather always flock together,' Jack ruminated, 'I am in queer company. However, I am in a position to whistle in the highwayman's face, if ever man was! I rather like the fellow with the black moustache—the skipper I suppose I must call him. I must see how he takes it when he hears the truth, and finds himself requested to furnish canvas breeches

and an old pair of shoes to the gentleman of fortune whose life he was lucky enough to save. Bergen, I think they said. Well, at the worst I must try what sort of sleeping-place a Bergen doorstep may be when we get there, so I'll make the most of a mattress while I have one.'

Turning his weary head round, he was soon asleep, his achievements in that line being prodigious at this period. He awoke at last to find the swinging-lamp lit, and somebody at his berth-side with a basin of soup which smelled deliciously. No such savour had regaled him since he had lain there; no such white, ringed hand had spread a napkin or extended the porringer. It was the skipper who bent over him, scrutinizing his face with piercing grey eyes, whose pleasant voice congratulated

him on having made a good recovery, and being near the end of tedious confinement.

'Please to take this broth,' he went on, with a smile that showed beautiful white teeth. 'I am the Count Bjornsen, owner of the yacht which has been lucky enough to rescue you, and I hope to be able to tempt your appetite with some variety to-morrow or next day, when, if this wonderful weather continues, we shall be on dry land—Norwegian soil.'

Poor Jack supped up the excellent soup after a grateful glance at the friendly countenance, and, feeling all the stronger for his food, essayed to thank the owner of the yacht and his crew for saving a life 'of small value to any one but the owner,' he said.

The Count smiled and bowed as he said:

'I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. West of Swardham in Longshire; and I imagine that the dwellers in that famous county would demur to this estimate of the life of one of their most respected magnates.'

With a sigh which in his weakened state he could not stifle, Jack began his explanation.

'I do not know what you will think of me, Count, when I own that I overheard a conversation (was it this morning?) between you and FitzRaymond. I was *not* asleep when you both came in and looked at me, though I did not feel up to much talking just then. And I must lose no time in removing a false impression about myself. I am not a wealthy squire; I am penniless,

destitute; and was no more than a game-keeper before that accident which cost one life, and would have ended mine had you not picked me up.'

He stopped, soon tired by his earnest disclaimer, and fixed honest eyes on the face that had smiled so pleasantly.

'Do you deny that you are the person for whom Colonel FitzRaymond takes you — the person whose name is in your little book?' the Count asked, with a slight abatement of geniality.

'I do not,' Jack said, in a low, pained voice; 'but if your friend had been in Longshire, or had been in a way of hearing the county news within the year past, he would know that I am just what I said— that Swardham never was mine in fact, but my cousin's, who lives there now.'

A look of intelligence came into the Count's face; he put his hand on Jack's forehead and muttered something in his native tongue, and then in blandest tones besought him not to agitate himself or try to do anything but sleep—with which exhortation he stepped gently from the cabin and closed the door.

'Oh hang it!' the poor fellow groaned; 'he thinks I am light-headed, and doesn't believe a word of my story—here's a pretty state of things to go to sleep upon; I wish I could get up.'

However an attempt to struggle up only bumped his head against the top of his berth—and feeling dizzy, he resigned himself to do as the Count had recommended. That gentleman was meanwhile conferring with FitzRaymond.

'Hang it all,' this latter protested; 'without being as well up in pedigrees as any old dowager, I *do* know about these Wests, and can swear that the old boy whom I remember as squire of Swardham out-lived both his sons. One broke his neck, and it's that elder one that this fellow reminded me so strongly of, as he lay in his berth yonder—the other died long before, quite a young fellow—and there was only the daughter left, who was this chap's mother. He was the only grandchild, and brought up as the heir, as a matter of course; quite a model heir he was too! He never had any cousin on the West side, and it is all bosh, whether he is raving, or, as is not impossible if he heard all we said (hang him!), trying it on a bit, with a view to getting off as cheaply as possible from our clutches!'

The Count's face darkened, and he nodded once or twice.

'Well,' he said abruptly, 'time will show. We have got him safe enough at any rate—and, under the circumstances, I shall take the yacht up to Bjornstrand, my own place, you know, where there is excellent anchorage in the fiord close under the house, without putting into Bergen first as I had intended.'

He stopped to meditate awhile—and went on presently in his usual bantering tones. 'History repeats itself. I dare say your royal Richard, for all his Lion-heart, would have been very glad to pass himself off for some petty squire when he was laid by the heels in Austria, and to save thereby that magnificent ransom for his own princely spending! Meanwhile our cue is to treat our

captive as brain-sick. It would be cruelty to turn the poor fellow loose till he comes to his senses. And I have people at home to nurse him admirably if needful, and take the best care of him till he comes round!'

END OF VOL. II.

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